

This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

#### Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + Refrain from automated querying Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

#### **About Google Book Search**

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at http://books.google.com/



# d Man's

[ KINGSCOTE | Salar |

ox- Clomina issue!

5

,

# LUCAS CLEEVE

AUTHOR OF
"SEVEN NIGHTS IN A GONDOLA," "THE FOOL'S TAN
ETC., ETC.





LONDON AND LEIPSIC
T. FISHER UNWIN
MCMVIII

# ALK 2055

भोष्ट्र<sub>य</sub> म्

[All rights reserved.]

#### CHAPTER I

COUNT DELLA BRACCIA was quite aw he laid himself open to a great deal of when he married Donna Lisa di Val But he thought with a good deal of that there was much more folly in al from doing what one felt inclined to do of what people said, than in running to the plans they have made for one plans don't coincide with our ambitidesires.

He had been married once before, to be supposed that he knew somethin wives; and in despite of his gout and of twinges of sciatica and lumbago, he withat the difference in him between and now, was a great deal more visil acquaintance, than it was apparent to feelings. He had still a good deal of fire left in him, and occasionally his

eyes would seem to burst into flames tale of prowess or daring or adventuathe impression that there was the so man enclosed in the case of another was a very handsome old man, an whom every one noticed in the street drawing-room, because he was so tinguished-looking, the white of his hing to emphasise the deep brown of as snow peaks make one notice the of a mountain in the distance.

Yes, as some one said, even brought out the good points of tl della Braccia, because without it yo tion would not have been called to t liness of his legs, the grace with managed a somewhat helpless mei the good cut of his trousers. He w old dandy by any means, but he was as particular about his appearance been as a young man, and he ha professional man-beauty of his day. nothing for his looks, but he was in of saying that no man or woman co to do less than their utmost to m selves agreeable to the eye of th men; and there always lingered a now that he had passed seventy, of the spark of remembrance of the

women had died for love of him, or pretento. And he was a manly old man, whose grievance against old age was that it unsteadied his hand for handling a gun, if such a necessity could be contemplated a moment, for the wielding of a rapier.

It was rumoured that he had fought m duels in his youth. One is still spoken o Venice, which was fought from two gondo the Count finally pushing his victim i the canal a corpse; that, people said, nonsense, but the Count could have told one or two others fought under even m trying circumstances.

Of late years, however, he had calr down extraordinarily; not so much beca of the gout, for, as he said, there w intervals when he felt a boy again, because, however much the enthusiasm action remains, old blood takes longer heat, and there were none of the eleme of aroused fire in his life any longer. first wife had tamed him a good deal, and t had had one son, whom the Count had o spoiled and now hated, who had given la good deal of trouble, ending by marry quite a common woman, the daughter o merchant of Venice, who was supposed to rich, and had died a bankrupt. When

Count heard of his son's disappoints laughed. He liked those little thrust at the humans, and on this occasion he apparently agreed that the you needed a few lessons.

The Count della Braccia belonger of the oldest families of Venice, as was in his presentment to the worthing which was like Venice, somethis resembled the calm, unruffled surfact canals, with the suspicion they give ing hidden mysteries beneath their mysteries which occasionally the flas light seems to inspire a perception of

And he himself was going to give a lesson by marrying the prettiest at Venice, aged eighteen. He knew son would scoff, and probably malipokes about him. He would have same thing at his age, but all the son would envy him, and he would bonna Lisa all the money he co away from his son. That, too, wo surprise. He was not even aware that his son, for there is no hatre than that of deep love turned to dithan that of one who knows that he ought to love, when common sent that there is nothing to love.

And then, of course, his son didn't k how very fond Donna Lisa was of him. had known her ever since she was a cl and the Di Val Morenos were so poor. they had not been so poor, no doubt t would not have listened to him, but two old men were about the same age; Val Moreno being a little the younger, talked very sensibly about it.

2

1

1

e

ı

1

1

S

ŀ

e

5

e s "You see, it isn't as if I were going live for ever," the Count della Braccia said.

"No," said Donna Lisa's father; "and will, of course, leave her a great dea money, and then she can marry whom likes."

He stipulated, her father, that she was be allowed to marry again. He could comagine that it was only because the arrangement was such a temporary one, seeing age of the old Count, that his daughter agreed to it. He wasn't quite sure that knew what she was about, and he dethink that he would urge her very much, if she did, what a relief it would be a these years of struggle! It was, perhaps, natural that Di Val Moreno should have no a good many bargains with the Count, in the marriage did take place, and quite nat

that the Count, realising his age, sho to them. He had always been re reasonable about people's demands, knew that it was only because they v that the Val Morenos agreed to this ment. If it had been anybody himself, he would have pronounc horrible arrangement—unnatural: bu a supreme belief in his own power ( and he knew women's temperament, quite convinced that when a girl has poor as Donna Lisa, with all the a and inherited appreciation of luxu comes of a long line of distinguished wealth has a wonderful power of su other emotions. She would be or richest women in Venice one day.

If she was good to him, if she wa... Once or twice he wondered if sbe. She was a good little girl now he had seen so many women cha marriage. Would wealth turn her were there hidden secrets of ten which he had not discovered?

All Venice was talking of the armarriage of Donna Lisa di Val I the old Count della Braccia. He, if an old man could get a beauti girl to nurse his gout, and put up

tantrums during his last years, was not to blamed; but that such a lovely and charm girl should marry a man for his money, t was incredible; and several relations of Di Val Morenos had gone to the Pala of Donna Lisa's parents and remonstrated

e

It was infamous—a thing for the Pope interfere about! It was against nature; be far shut her up in a convent! And it no good her parents saying: "But I ass you that she is fond of him. She has ne been quite like other girls. She wants marry him. She is perfectly happy." I aunt, the Marchesa di Terra Beata, had sisted on seeing her alone and asking he she knew what she was about, whether tl were forcing her into this. There had be secret communications between the confess and direttoris of the different families, to and find out if undue influence was be brought to bear. It was even rumoured t Di Val Moreno had mortgaged all his est to Della Braccia, and that the foreclos of the mortgage was being saved by t marriage.

But Donna Lisa mystified them all by lapparent unconcern of their anxiety. To launt she said:

"But how can you think that mama wo

# . 14 AN OLD MAN'S DAR

allow me to marry him if I chim? She has told me twenty he is too old, but I don't think he is a dear, and beautiful as a

The Abbess of the Convent Heart at Le Cadore had talked to time, asking her if she realised was going to take, and the tem would lie in her path if she charming young man; but she c

Presently in his exasperation, Braccia's son applied to the differ of the family, suggesting a counc into the state of his father's mi he was sane, and to have the a of his affairs put into the hands but this failed. The old Count be examined as to the soundness -it rather amused him-and se saries away laughing, and cor over: and the son had the s realising that he had put the fir to his father's antagonism, an breach irreparable. He took to wife, and gambling more furious so that his father should have debts and be crippled; but th only laughed. He had no inte ing his son's debts, or being



#### :NG

not like

times that is too old. tatue." the Holy her a long e step she ations that rer met a v laughed. count della it branches to enquire , to see if ninistration f trustees: nsented to f his mind his adverletely won sfaction of ning stroke made the abusing his than ever, to pay his old Count ion of payfinancially

## AN OLD MAN'S DARLI

crippled. He was, on the contrary, spend a great deal on making Dovery happy, so that he should be turn the laugh on those who now of him. It pleased him to think to age when other men have done with sit huddled up on the hearth we death, he was going to enjoy hims young man, and, as he expressed the arms of beauty.

His priest, at whom he always little bit, had tried to persuade hembark on this venture, but he hat him, too. He knew that the Clausted on his quarrel with his some of his fortune at his deatl amused him to think that Donna I have it instead, and probably square for he had noticed that those who been poor, enriched, often become spand he was pleased, as if now i age he was going to play his last with life, with humanity, and the going to be the best of all.

But it must not be thought the decided on asking for Donna L without premeditation. He would dreamed of asking her to marry I had not been beautiful. He had a



#### 16 AN OLD MAN'S DA

ugly women which was almost he admired her character. I she was thoroughly good and it had known her ever since sh little child.

The fancy had come slowly. see how poor the Di Val becoming. He hated the sig yet they were so proud that 1 let him help them. It was no lands were mortgaged, but ir mortgage them the family li misery, as only Italians of gr live. There were only two children of peasants born on trained in former days by the which in their wealthier day: their less miserable days, the I had had around them; and the they still looked beautiful in 1 house, because they could r beautiful, because for genera been cultivated and planted a because they were laid out in always looked imposing, honeysuckle trailed around t roses or some rare climbing pl the house—ah! that was diffe peasants they now employed



ll, and
w that
t. He
quite a

ated to s were poverty, ould not that the not to lmost in mily can ints, the place and servants, rather in Morenos ens, while ont of the elp being they had nded, and ces which hen wild instead of nut behind The few

the share

system, found it was all they could d cultivate the vineyards and the "Gran' Turthey had no time to attend to the gard and the old man who looked after them bent with rheumatism, so the borders not clipped except just in front of the he and the leaves were not swept, and the rhung disconsolately over the entrance to arbour, while on the walls of the house climbing rose tree had so spread her thi branches, that it was impossible now to or shut one of the library windows wit cutting it down.

But all this did not seem so dreadfu Donna Lisa as the fact that she rarely ha new dress. When she had, it was such event that she felt quite uncomfortable i Her mother used to employ the best di maker in town, now a woman came by day, and did as the Marchesa told her as as she could; but it was strange, Donna thought, that somehow the dress never los as she had thought it would, nor at all like picture in the fashion-book from which it supposed to have been copied. But alv Marietta, the dressmaker, said that she c not do such and such a thing: she had n done it before that way, or she had not right irons for pressing it, or something



always missing; and of late Donna Lisa had taken to wearing such simple things as Marietta could make, and, although she did not know it, looked a great deal better than she did in the copies of the fashion plates. It was, however, owing to Marietta's inefficiency, that the idea had come to the Count della Braccia to marry Donna Lisa.

One day he said to her:

"In that long, simple gown you look I a Greek statue;" and she had laughed.

"That is a good thing," she had told "for it is all Marietta can make."

Her mother always frowned when s' bare the private family restrictions in t Just because Della Braccia was so didn't like it. But that was just whim in Donna Lisa. She alway everything that happened. Onc had people to luncheon she said whisper:

"Per carita, don't ask twic wine, for there are only three

After she had said this rethought over the matter set a Di Val Moreno could far as birth and family without a dot, what was do? It was a shame, re

should not be in its proper setting; but if she had not a *dot* she would probably have to go into a convent, or perhaps marry, as some of the great Italian nobles were beginning to do, into one of the families with money and with no traditions. That would be a dreadful thing for a Di Val Moreno to do.

The more he thought of it, the more the fact of his trying to marry Donna Lisa seemed to him like an act of charity, which it was his duty to perform. One last act of philanthropy, which would not be so disagreeable either, but which would make him feel as if a rather useless life had been of some good. And the Di Val Morenos were so proud that it seemed the only way to help them. And the more he thought of it, the more he liked the idea. Lately he had taken to going two or three times a week to their house, and taking her presents of bonbons and flowers.

"He is very fond of Lisa," her mother would say to her husband. "I should not wonder if he left her some of his money, for he will try and leave everything he can away from that scapegrace, Luigi."

But when the Marchese remembered that there was not much difference between his own age and the Count's, his wife's hopes brought but scant comfort. It would be a

good thing for Lisa, but as for him, it wouldn't bring so much relief if it were a million scudi, as a few thousand lire would now.

And .this winter things were worse than ever, for the woods of their villa in the Cadore were sold for timber to a lumber merchant, and they had to pay for wood and coal, and Venice can be cold in winter. This year they had tried to let the Palazzo; but it was just the way always with the poor-nobody wanted their villa, although it was so big and in the best position on the Canal 'Grande, because it was so badly furnished. So all the beautiful rooms upstairs were closed, and they lived the ground floor, so as not to burn so m fires; and Donna Lisa's only winter dress made out of an old one of her mother's was of a deep purple—much too old a for such a young girl. She felt ridica it, and her mother had worn it so ! that with all Marietta's good-will not make it look like the skirts of t was crooked—there was no denving crooked-and the first day she ha in it Donna Lisa burst into tears often that she gave way, but, r middle of the season to go out

And in vain her mother told Val Moreno could afford to go

of wild beasts, and that the colour suited her hair.

"I would rather be a peasant," Donna Lisa declared, "for then I could go in the back streets barefoot, and no one would see." She didn't know how it cut to her mother's heart to hear her, while she determined to try and save enough out of the very meagre allowance made by her husband for housekeeping, so that she could buy Lisa a new dress; but she thought grimly, as she considered the matter, that Lisa had a good appetite, and that she would feel retrenched rations as much as she felt going out in the violet dress. And as she went out, Lisa brushed past the Count without hardly greeting him. She did not want him to see her red eyes, and especially she hoped that he would not notice the hateful dress, for she knew that he paid attention to dress, and that he visited some of the best dressed women in the town. The Principessa Millore was his niece, and she was reputed the best dressed woman in Italy.

And she so rarely behaved rudely, that he felt as if she had knocked against him, but she hadn't. She had got into her gondola as quickly as she could, followed by the maid, and sat down so that he could not see the way the skirt hung.

## •

But he had noticed nothing, except that she had not greeted him, and he was afraid that perhaps, after all, she did not like him, and that his castle in the air would all dissipate into the mists which hung over Venice sometimes.

AN OLD MAN'S DARLING

"What is the matter with the charming Donna Lisa?" he asked her mother. "She brushed past me as if she were going to meet a young man round the corner."

"Ah!" her mother sighed, then she laughed. "She doesn't like her dress," she said. "You know what children are, and Lisa is still child."

"What is the matter with it?"

"Oh, well, it is made from one of mine. was a beautiful dress; it cost me once ter the yard, and to have all these things was I always wear black now. It is really a and I had it made up for Lisa, and r does not like to go out in it!"

For nothing on earth would she the Count that she had had to have up for Lisa. But he knew.

"Now, Marchesa, what is t' secrets between old friends, eh? is it having an old buffer lik friend if I cannot dress that quite right; she is beautiful, to show off her beauty."

The Marchesa shrugged her shoulders impatiently. With any one else but Count della Braccia, she would have been very angry indeed, but he was such an old friend; and then, perhaps, who could tell? he might leave his fortune to Lisa, and goodness knows they could not afford to lose any chances, for since their fortunes had been swept away it seemed as if everything they tried to do, and there was little enough they could do, went wrong. They had had bad years with their vineyards in Tuscany, and a lawyer they had trusted in had decamped with some papers which were of great importance, with which the Marchese could have mortgaged a part of another estate, and altogether things were far too dark-looking for her to be able to afford to be very angry with Count della And then an old man like that talked all sorts of nonsense; he was almost like an old woman.

"What nonsense you talk, Della Braccia; really, one would think you were a child! One doesn't say things like that even as a joke. You know that it cannot be done, that all Venice would talk—even the shops, the dress-makers."

"It is you, my dear Marchesa, who talk nonsense." (They often quarrelled like this,

these two.) "Is it likely that I shall go to this one and that, and say: Send Donna Lisa a hat; send Donna Lisa a pair of gloves-what am I saying?—twelve pairs of gloves; yes, she ought to have twelve pairs at a time; that is not enough: Send Donna Lisa-what shall I say?—half a dozen pocket handkerchiefs? It is not like that that it is done. I give her a small allowance, just as if I were her godfather or her grandfather-goodness me, an old man like myself!—and she buys what she likes: she will know what to buy-don't be afraid, they all know what suits them. I remember, cara mia, when you always wore coral pink but always you knew that it suited yo Ah! I remember you well at the races w that coral pink dress, and then a white ' you looked charming—and that was tv years ago. Ah! our little Lisa was not then."

The Marchesa laughed and blushed remembered the coral pink dress and the hat. Then it had created a furore knew that now it would look absurbed been much talked about in the It was one of her trousseau dresse come from Paris. The Di Val Morich then.

"You are an old goose!" she

was pleased all the same. It is good when one is old to remember that once one was young and admired.

"Ah! we have changed since then," she said, and sighed. She had forgotten all about Lisa and the violet dress.

Now the two fell into reminiscences.

"It was the year, you remember, that Ugo dei Lerici fought a duel with Lanzoni on account of the Duchessa di Bellosquardo."

"Yes; and then poor Franelli used to go about with his wooden leg and throw flowers into the carriages."

"Yes; and poor Carli used to have his shop then with ices."

And so they went on, the Marchesa delighted to go back in memory to the good old days, and the Count with his wonderful diplomacy trying to win over the mother of Donna Lisa into a pleasant mood.

Then presently he got up to go.

"No, I won't stay to breakfast to-day." He knew that it wouldn't be good, because it was not a market day, and then they could not afford delicacies. "But I tell you, Marchesa, the best thing you can do is to let me marry that charming child. Yes, really, think it over."

"How can you talk such nonsense!" and the

Marchesa went off into a peal of laughter, showing her teeth, which were very pretty.

"Go away," she said, "go away; you don't know what you are talking about."

He leaned on his stick in the doorway, because he was suffering a little bit from gout this morning, but he looked a very handsome old man.

"I would make a good husband," he said, "and I shan't last so very long either. Think it over."

He went downstairs very carefully, guiding himself by the banisters.

"Dear me, how cold this staircase is, per Dio!"

He heard the Marchesa laughing to herself as he went down, but it didn't offend him.

At the foot of the stairs he met Donna Livin the violet dress. She felt better now a ashamed of her outburst.

She spoke sweetly to him, and he j with her, then he said:

"When you go upstairs ask mama have said to her."

The next moment he was in his a taking his hat off, first to one and the other. Now and then he kissed his some pretty woman.

He had an air of conquest notw

his age; something of the air of a river god without age, dominating society from a cornucopia of experience, which made him always the fashion, and his clothes the best cut in the whole town, a red carnation in his buttonhole, and with a *chic* in taking off his hat which few men could imitate, and which the young men envied.

#### CHAPTER II

WHEN Donna Lisa entered the room which was really her father's study, but which was now used as a sitting-room by the whole family, because it looked on to the canal and caught the morning sun, she looked round enquiringly. She really looked beautiful in the violet dress, her mother thought, and so in keeping with Venice. It had something regal about it which reminded one of Doges and Procurati, and the fair women of years ago when Venice commanded the waters and threw out triumphant banners over the Orient. She was still smiling to herself at the thought of what Count della Braccia had suggested.

- "Did he leave anything for me?"
- "No, no, cara, not to-day; I expect that h forgot. Besides, you are getting big to expec sweetmeats every time he comes."
- "But he spoke as if—— He told me ask you what he had said."
  - "Did he really, now? What a strange

he is, to say it to me—yes, but no, he could not have meant that."

- "Tell me, mama mia, what did he say?"
- "My dear, it is so absurd. He said actually that the best thing we could do would be to marry you to him."
- "Me—to him?" Donna Lisa laid her hand on her breast gesticulating as the Venetians do.
- "Yes, cara; and he might have been threeand-twenty when he said it; but you must not pay any attention—an old man like that!"

Donna Lisa sank on to a chair near the window. She had been thinking very seriously that morning, the episode of the violet dress had made life seem almost insupportable.

Presently she looked up and said, with extraordinary sang froid:

- "Why not?
- "Why not—but, really, are you mad? He is seventy—seventy, ben suonato."

Donna Lisa laughed.

- "It is better than if he were sixty."
- "You mean"—her mother looked at her with a little horror—"why, that would be a dreadful idea—wicked!"
- "Oh, mama, how absurd you are! I am very fond of him."

80

"Fond of him—yes, we are all fond of him, but to marry him!"

AN OLD MAN'S DARLING

"Well, I don't see anybody else, and I don't want to go into a convent."

The Marchesa was silent. Surely there was a tragedy in these great families. To think that either Donna Lisa, the lovely Donna Lisa, would probably have to be an old maid—and an old maid in Italy is almost something improper, at least abnormal—or she would have to go into a convent!

And one's only daughter! Of course, if she has a vocation, one does not refuse her to the good God; but Lisa—no, Lisa was made for the world, even the good Cardinal Vanoni had said so. He had said: "That charming child will do better in the world."

And Lisa showed no signs of being religious at all, as Catholics go. She went to mass every Sunday, of course, and sometimes to vespers, but she was not at all devout. The Marchesa hoped that she would become more devout as she grew older, but she certainly would be difficult to marry off without a dot, and every year that dot became more and more mirage. It had been hoped that there would be something when the old Duchessa di Val Moreno died. She was a grand-aunt, but, Dio mio! she left debts instead—gambling

81

debts, when every one thought she was given to good works. There was hardly enough to pay for all the masses she had left behind in her will were to be said.

But for the moment the Marchesa paid but little attention to what Lisa said. Her beautiful daughter married to an old man why, the idea was preposterous! And then, of course, Lisa didn't understand. The first thing, they knew, there would be a scandal.

She spoke of other things. Had Lisa paid the grocer; had she ordered the wood—the amount that Anina used in the kitchen was preposterous; and who had she seen?

Lisa chatted till the old servant came to announce luncheon, which he did with the same gravity with which he had been used to announce it in the old days, when the table was covered with every delicacy, and a groom of the chambers attended to the service, and footmen in the Di Val Moreno liveries hurried backwards and forwards from the kitchen to the dining-room. Now they eat worse than peasants; he didn't know what was going to happen; and the lodgers who lived in the top apartment of all, were going away, so he had heard, because the house was so cold. The big stove in the hall was never lighted now. It consumed enough char-

coal in a week to keep the family warm for two years.

But later the Marchesa told her husband what the Count had said.

"Did you ever hear such an old fool; and I had always thought he looked upon her as a daughter!"

"Ah, well, a daughter—he has had enough of children with that scapegrace, Luigi. If she were older, an ugly old maid for instance, it would not be so bad; he is the richest man in Venice, except, perhaps, the Jew Savielli."

He spoke smilingly, and the Marchesa searched his face with her keen, enquiring glance. Why had he mentioned Savielli?

"But Lisa—well, he has nerve; he imagines that he is thirty."

"If she were an ugly old maid he would not look at her," said his wife, and laughed. She had a bright disposition, and laughed a good deal when she was not in despair.

"And would you believe that he told Lisa on the stairs to come and ask me what he had said? He will put ideas into the child's head."

Her father laughed.

"Well, and what did she say?"

"She said it was a good idea."

"No, no, I will not have it; no—now, listen to me. I will not hear of it."

He spoke hastily, as if he were afraid that his wife would urge the girl, as if he were afraid himself of the temptation it was to coerce her into marrying Della Braccia. Good heavens! Lisa married to Della Braccia—why, it would be an extraordinary piece of good fortune! But his little Lisa!

And the next morning Lisa found her mother in tears.

"Ah, my child, your father is going to sell the Giotto!"

"The Giotto!" Lisa turned a little pale.

It was the most magnificent Giotto in the world, and had been in the Di Val Moreno family for years. It was almost like selling a member of the family, that Madonna. Lisa remembered that when she was a little girl she had often prayed to it, and once it had seemed to her as if it had smiled. Surely now the end was at hand of everything, if the Giotto was going to be sold! Her father had always said: "I will part with Lisa, but not with the Giotto." It was his little joke when her marriage was discussed, the marriage which apparently would never come off.

"The Giotto!" Lisa sat down on a chair near her mother's bed and clasped her hands. "But, why, do we need the money?"

"Ah, my child, we must live."

Yes, they must live, she understood that, but surely they had something to live on; and the Giotto—why, that would fetch thousands of *lire!* And, living as they did, they surely did not need thousands of *lire*. She, Lisa, would rather wear the old purple frock for the rest of her life, than allow the Giotto to be sold.

"Yes, it appears that that loan at the bankah, you do not know anything about it. When the roof came off the house in Tuscany, the year of the earthquake, we had to put a new one. Since that is all we have, the rent from that to live upon, and people will not take a house without a roof, your father had to go to Delfieris bank for a loan, and every year he has hoped to pay it; now, they won't wait any longer, so to-morrow Savielli is coming to buy it for some American. I tell your father that if he could see the American he would get a good price; but that Jew-he will, of course, beat your father down, and then get an enormous price for it himself."

"The Giotto!" Lisa had no words of consolation to offer her mother, for it seemed to her the most awful calamity. There were so many other pictures in the big drawing-

85

room upstairs, why not take those, she asked her mother. "That horrible red woman with the wicked smile, the Rubens—why not that?"

"Because, my child, this American is collecting Giottos, nothing but Giottos. He bought one last week, he will buy another to-morrow."

Presently Viola, the maid, came in to do the Marchesa's hair. She was a wonderful coiffeuse, but then there was nothing she could not do. She had even shown Marietta how to make the purple gown. She washed the clothes, she did the rooms, she did everything except the cooking, and sometimes, when Anina was late from market, she even cooked the breakfast; and to her, too, the Marchesa said in awestruck tones as if she were announcing a death in the family:

"They are going to take away the Giotto!" It was like saying of the dead "They are gone," rather than "They are dead."

"Ah, Santissima Vergine!" Viola almost shrieked. "Mamma mia!" She crossed herself.

Surely there would be a curse upon the house if the Madonna were sold like that, like an old hen in the market!

"Tell Giuseppe that to-day I shall not receive," the Marchesa said.

This was no day to receive the frivolous.

It was an epoch in the family history. The passing of the Giotto must be treated resignedly, but solemnly. When Lisa went downstairs she found her father pacing the hall in the cold. It nearly killed him to part with the Giotto.

"Dear father"—she slid her arm into his — "after all, it is but a painting, and we shall all perhaps be more at ease."

He stared at her: was she heartless after all? "But, Lisa, it is the Giotto!"

"Yes, the Giotto." Lisa's voice was very desolate.

Presently some one was shown into the hall by the servant. It was a creditor, and the Marchese followed him into the library.

Lisa went upstairs to the big drawing-room. The blinds were raised because the Di Val Moreno didn't want all Venice to know that they lived on one floor; when their friends called, they said: "It is so much pleasanter here in the winter; we get all the sun on the canal." The room was huge and very bare. There was no carpet on the floor. It had been brought downstairs to the dining-room, but what furniture was still there was of great value: a table of lapis lazuli between two of the windows and a table of inlaid jadestone between the others, and two beautiful cabinets,

one white on black, the other black on white. exquisitely carved, but the glory of the room was its pictures. It was more like a picture gallery than anything else. Two Canalettos which looked at if the painter had caught a ray of sunlight on the canvas and fixed it there by some secret process, a Titian, a Pinturecchio, a Rembrandt, and quantities of pictures by pupils of these, by artists known only to Venice or other parts of Italy, one or two Dutch portraits, a Velasquez; but, most beautiful of all, with the morning sun shining on it, the Madonna of Giotto, with its huge frame taking one panel of the wall all to itself. What a gap it would leave! thought Lisa. It was cold, and she threw open the windows, and the sun streamed in on to the walls which had once been red. but which were now almost grey, matching the cornice and the beading which had once been gilt, but which were now so dotted by fly marks, that they looked as if they were made of yellow wood. The ceiling was painted by Fra Angelico, and represented the Trinity, in a manner as confusing as the Athanasian Creed. The doors were white and gold. Lisa remembered this room a few years ago crowded with well-dressed women and all the smartest men in Venice. She remembered a children's party there, when she had worn white and pale

blue, and people had said she looked like a little Madonna; and she remembered to-day that even then the Madonna of Giotto had seemed to watch her at play, and to say, "Be good."

Surely, surely it was a dreadful thing that they should have to part with it! Lisa was a child at heart, and as an only child she had been spared by her parents too severe an initiation into their troubles, yet she was intelligent by nature and quick, as only children are, to grasp what is going on around them, and she felt instinctively that the departure of the Giotto meant a repetition of the catastrophe later. To-day the Giotto, then perhaps in a few months the Luini, then, who could tell? perhaps the Veronese, then one by one all of them; and to-morrow it would be all over Venice that the Giotto was sold: what a talk there would be! She had felt ashamed for their friends to see her in the purple dress, but now it would be dreadful. Savielli would be sure to talk of it. He would be so proud to have bought the Di Val Moreno Giotto that he would tell every one. To Lisa it seemed a disgraceful thing. For the first time in her life she felt the impotence of her sex.

"If I were a man," she said to herself, the while she realised that her father was a man,

and yet could not work because of his position. After all, what was a man to do who had learned no trade?

Yet something seemed to urge within her that it was a most extraordinary thing to be a Di Val Moreno and live in this beautiful Palazzo, and have no money.

To her girlish fancy it seemed as if the patient Madonna looked sad at leaving, and especially at going to hang in the house of a heretic. Here she had been considered almost as if she were alive, a patron saint, an oracle to be consulted when disaster befel the family, and standing here beneath the picture, Lisa, her hands clasped as if in prayer, said:

"Tell me, Madonna Santissima, what am I to do, what am I to do?"

And now to her imaginative mind it seemed as if a wonderful thing happened. The sun seemed to pour into the room, to search out all the dusty cob-web-veiled corners, to show up how the white paint and the gilding had come off the doors, but also to bring out every tiny streak of red colour that clung still to the walls; and then it played on the lips of the Madonna till they looked as if they moved. To the girl it seemed like a miracle, as if she were in a trance, and as if the sunlight had shot straight to her heart; a strange ecstatic joy

seemed to fill her being, a joy and a calm, just as she had been told the young nuns felt when they had given their hearts and souls to God, and given up the world. The Madonna had told her what to do, and there was no longer any doubt or hesitancy in her expression, rather a look of rapture, of triumph. For an instant she knelt down, and drawing a rosary from her pocket said an Ave Maria. When she reached the door the smile still lingered on her lips, the smile of one who has been told a secret to be kept from the world, but which has given new colour to life. She stood for one moment at the door of the large room, noting without knowing it, how the radiant sun showed up the faded brocade of the curtains which had once matched the wall paper.

It was cold this morning, but the glare of sunlight from the canal brought an aspect of warmth which deluded one into the belief that it was not cold outside; the very air seemed charged with busy activity. She could hear the cry of the gondoliers, and a sparrow alighted on the stone balcony and chirped.

Life seemed to voice pleasant surprises in store for her, to beckon to her, and anticipations dazed her. It was good, after all, to be beautiful, to be young, and to be able to sacrifice one's youth and one's beauty. This

was a thousand times better than going into a convent, yet it was rather like it. She closed the door of the picture gallery reverently, as if it were the door of a church. Always she would remember it as it had been this morning, bathed in sunlight and with the smile on the lips of the Madonna. She felt a renewed interest in the Giotto as if it had been given into her keeping.

At the foot of the stairs she met old Giuseppe. He sighed as he made way for her on the stairs.

Ah! the Nobilissima had been to look once more at the Madonna of Giotto! He sighed.

But she didn't look at all as if she had been crying, as he had expected. Instead she said mysteriously:

"When that man comes — the Jew, you know, Savielli — arrange for me to see him before any one else."

Old Giuseppe stared.

It was an extraordinary thing for Donna Lisa to tell him to do. No young girl in Italy ever receives a man alone, and then this common Jew, this picture dealer!

He confided in Viola. What was he to do, what if the Marchesa heard of it and grew angry?



Viola laughed; poor old Giuseppe, how would he get on without her, Viola?

"You do as the Nobilissima tells you. When it comes to the Giotto being sold, we cannot do as others do, like other days. The Signorina is right. She has more sense than all of us put together. She is as clever as she is beautiful. You do as she says. Show him into the little room near the dining-room, and I will fetch her. Who knows but that the good God has put it into her heart to save the picture? and He will give her words, too, with which to speak."



#### CHAPTER III

THE fat Jew was rather surprised when he was ushered into the little side room and found himself in the presence of Donna Lisa. It was already dusk, and Savielli knew why the Marchesa had appointed this late hour. It would not do for him to be seen coming to the Palazzo Di Val Moreno. Savielli had a good heart, although he was hated by the poor, because he lent money at exorbitant rates of interest and took their jewels when they couldn't pay. Now he was sure that the Nobilissima was going to plead with him to leave the Giotto. Perhaps her father had persuaded her to get him to lend them money without taking it. If she did, he would not like to refuse, but he knew better than any one else that the Marchese had no security to offer. But he was sorry. He was a great admirer of feminine beauty, and he had a daughter of his own, just the age of Donna Lisa. If only these aristocrats were not such fools, they could make money as well as he

and his race did, and money, after all, was the only real power.

He bowed very respectfully to Donna Lisa. The aristocrats always treated him like a dog, but that didn't matter; they always had to end by coming to him, and he treated them better than that old scoundrel, Abraham Borneo, who pretended he was an Italian, and was a German.

It never occurred to Donna Lisa to ask him to sit down, only she felt instinctively that she must be nice to him.

"I have come to see you first," she began a little nervously, "because I have a favour to ask you."

"Whatever I can do, Signorina." He leaned against the fireplace. Viola had lit a little wood fire, and it was pleasant on this cold day after the gondola. Savielli was accustomed to every comfort in his own house.

Lisa sank on to a chair.

"It grieves us so much to lose the Giotto," she began. "My mother is quite ill with the idea, and I—well, I suppose you will think it silly, but I have always remembered that Madonna ever since I was a little child, and it grieves me very much to part with it."

"I quite understand." Savielli flashed a diamond against the firelight as he spoke. He

was thinking how different fate was in her treatment of people. Here was one of the most beautiful girls in Venice without a jewel or even good clothes, and there was that hideous little Contessa Amalfi, who had the most beautiful jewels in the world. He was a little a philosopher in his way, Savielli. He was thinking, too, that it must cost this proud girl a good deal to have to plead with him.

And Lisa went on:

"I want to ask you to be so good as not to see my father to-day—to go away and to come back to-morrow. To-morrow I think we can do without selling the Giotto."

"Ah, but, Nobilissima-"

That was all very well, but Savielli had promised the picture to the American, and then he was going to make a good deal out of it himself. It was a tall order to ask him to forego the profit he was looking forward to.

"But you said anything you could do."

She spoke like a child, and the picture dealer smiled.

"Yes, but that, Signora—besides, your father said that he was in a hurry."

"It is already evening—one night, after all."

Lisa looked towards the window, but then it always seemed like evening in this room, always, because it looked out on to an ugly

square at the back giving on to a narrow street, and the windows had been paned with tinted Murano glass.

Looking towards the window he thought her profile the most beautiful he had ever seen.

"But, pardon me, Signora, between this and to-morrow is, as you say, a short time: it cannot make much difference to the Marchesa, to anybody after all—one can't pay bills in the night." He laughed, and Lisa smiled. "But how on earth are you going to find the money by to-morrow?"

The expression she had worn in the big picture gallery returned to Lisa.

"Oh yes, to-morrow I can save the picture."

She spoke as if she were quite certain.

Savielli wondered how. He could only imagine that she had some friend who would lend it, and, knowing the Marchese's reputation for pride, he could fancy that even this was very distasteful to them. As for him, he would rather part with the picture if he were they; but he wanted to please the Signorina. People said he had no heart, but it went to his heart to see this proud girl pleading for the picture.

"You place me in a difficult position,

Signorina; however, we will see; but, if you will allow me, I will go and see the picture. It is upstairs, is it not? I saw it once long ago when the old Marchese died, and a valuation was made, but perhaps, after all, it is not so good as they say; it may not do for my purchaser."

Lisa's heart froze within her. What if, after all, she spoiled the purchase for her father, what if he blamed her for having interfered? For one moment the ecstatic state of certainty, of implicit faith, seemed to desert her. She hesitated.

"No, you must not look at it, then you would want to take it away."

It was her hesitation which made him insist; what if she had a scheme in her head for making away with it? She looked innocent enough, but then most young girls looked innocent, and nearly all pretty women; but he had a wide experience, Savielli, and he had known women do some surprising things. There was the Contessa Lici—goodness, what a woman! He had been down one evening to ask her for her jewels and laces and all her pretty things, for she had owed him a great deal of money, and she showed him everything.

"Look here, Savielli," she had said to him,

"you are a brute, a low Jew, but all the same I will do what is right. I will be honest with you. These are my things, and they are worth a great deal more than I owe you, but I ask you one thing—not to take them till to-morrow morning. I have a reception to-night, and I wish to wear them."

What could a man do? Of course he left them, and the next morning at eleven he went down to fetch the things, and the hotel was closed, the Countess Lici had left in the night. When he tried to sue for the things they said that long ago they had been made the property of the Church, they were only lent to the Contessa. Ah, a good many things were said about the Jews, but when it came to the Christians and the Church, then too something might be said, but no one would listen: it was all right.

"Nobilissima, I cannot do as you wish, because your father made me promise to settle this evening."

At that moment a door was heard opening and shutting on the other side of the house. Lisa rose, looking very pale.

"Oh, I beg of you!" She clasped her hands in her agitation, and Savielli felt her agitation communicating itself to him. He was not at all sure that she had not already parted with



the Giotto, and was afraid of her father discovering it. "In a few moments he will be here, and then it will be too late. Oh, I beg of you!" Without knowing what she was doing, forgetting her pride, she went a step nearer and laid her thin white hand on his arm. "I beg of you!" she said.

Now Savielli felt quite sure that there was something wrong. If he could only be sure that he was safe, then he would do as the young lady asked, and come back to-morrow. He took out his watch.

"Nobilissima, I want to do as you ask, but I have a great deal to consider. I have my promise to the purchaser, and then to your father—and, yes, I have myself to consider. I am a poor man, and I must live, and I have children, a daughter, too, of your age—yes, a fine girl; you have seen her, perhaps, on the canal?"

"Yes, yes." Lisa didn't remember having seen her; if she had seen a Jewess on the canal, Savielli's daughter would not seem different to any other, she would probably not have noticed her.

"Then for the love of heaven, for her sake, wait till to-morrow!"

"Well, I will tell you, Nobilissima. Let me see the picture, and I will leave it till

to-morrow—till the next day, if you wish, if you can get your father to wait."

"On your word of honour?"

"Yes, my word of honour."

She raised a curtain hanging to the wall, and opened a door. This led to the upstairs room by a back way, used by the servants when all the house was in use; it was dark, but she led the way.

"I will take you there," she said, and Savielli breathed more freely. After all, he had nothing to fear.

The room was as she had left it that morning, with the blinds drawn up and the windows open. It was cold, but the afternoon sun streaming in made it look much brighter than the room they had left.

"It is here," she said, conducting him to the picture.

Then she stood there. What if her father should find her! Her heart was beating so that her bosom heaved. She had never dared so much in her life. If only he would look quickly, and then go!

But it seemed as if he would never go; he went up to the picture and passed his hand over it, then he went away and looked again. It was the most beautiful Giotto he had ever seen, and his heart yearned over it as if it

were a child he loved. He wished he had not promised, he would have liked to take it away at once before anything happened. He did not think this poor young lady would be able to pay the bank to-morrow any more than to-day, yet he would like to feel it safe in his house to-night.

"And I must not take it to-night?" He looked at the girl.

"You have promised," she said simply.

"Yes, that's true."

He buttoned up his coat. He had no reputation to lose, yet it pleased him that this slip of a girl, little more than a child, believed in his promise.

"Well, when shall I come?"

"To-morrow evening."

A step was heard coming up the stairs.

"Oh, please will you go now?" She opened another door at the end of the room which led to the back hall. "You will not meet any one," she whispered.

"Very well," he nodded, as if he entered into the mystery of her secret.

As the gondola floated across the canal he said to himself that he hoped she would not succeed, he wanted that Giotto. Ah! it was magnificent; almost he regretted that he had been so weak, yet all the evening he was

in a rare good humour with his wife and children. The mood came from a combination of sentiments.

The American could not fail to be pleased with the picture, and, after all, he had behaved very nicely to the young girl. She, at least, would not call him "a dog of a Jew."



#### CHAPTER IV

When Savielli left her Lisa felt as if she were going to faint. Very strictly brought up by parents who were even old-fashioned in their ideas, and notwithstanding a rather mutinous disposition, which had earned for her the reputation of being self-willed, and a little advanced in ideas, by the mothers of marriageable daughters, she yet realised that she had undertaken a step with the further results of which, she would probably not be able to cope.

She had asked the Madonna to inspire her, it is true, and she had so far been able to carry out her schemes, but what if her father found out that Savielli had been to the house, and that she had seen him? It would create an upheaval she did not dare to contemplate. That she should have received a man alone, have taken this man, a common, low Jew money-lender, up to see the Giotto and then sent him away, when the Marchese was downstairs, pacing up and down waiting for him to come, and given over to despair now that he

thought he would not come, seemed to her nothing short of madness on her part. Now that Savielli had gone, she felt as if it were some one else who had done all this. Perhaps she had ruined her father. No, the Madonna would not have allowed such a thing; besides, he was coming again to-morrow.

But it was not only what had happened to-day that alarmed her, it was the completion of the scheme. She was so afraid it would fail, or that her courage would fail. This evening she felt much less faith in Giotto's Madonna; indeed, it seemed as if the Madonna had led her into a dreadful imbroglio; but one idea dominated, and that was that when it came to selling pictures to Americans, and to interviewing Jew money-lenders, it was time that something should be done. Just now she was in dire terror lest her mother should send for her and ask her where she had been, who she had seen. Till last year they had had a sort of companion-governess in the house, who followed every movement of Donna Lisa, and it was certainly wrong that a girl in her position should be obliged to run out with a servant like any of the tradesman's daughters; but it was so expensive keeping the companion, not only because the drain on their resources was more than they could afford, and her

salary was always in arrears, but because she would eat. Latterly the Marchesa grudged her every mouthful of bread.

"If it were only us three," she would say to her husband, "but one has to feed the governess decently." And at last her husband had suggested that Lisa was old enough to do without one. It seemed very dreadful, for all these big houses had a femme de confiance, some one to serve as chaperon for the daughters, as secretary to the head of the house, or pour out the tea for the Marchesa, to do the shopping, and interview the tradesmen when they could not get their money; but of late affairs had become so critical, that it was a relief to be without her, albeit the Marchesa said it gave her a headache looking after Lisa. One never could tell with a young girl. Lisa was good-yes, but she was very pretty, and the gilded youth of Venice none too scrupulous. It seemed to her that the gondola of the young Count Ugolino Vremi had spent three hours under Lisa's balcony the other day; and then the other night who was that serenading under their windows? Lisa was sleeping like an angel-the Marchesa had gone to see; but all the same, she was old enough to be married now, and she might get ideas into her headah! it was not easy to bring up a daughter; one should either marry them early, or put them into a convent.

So, as a rule, the Marchesa was calling Lisa most of the day, or sending for her, or giving her some work to do in her own bedroom, or in the sitting-room, so that she could have her under her own eye. Once a week the music master came, and once a week the singing master, for Donna Lisa had a very sweet voice. Occasionally they got paid, but when they didn't, they went on just the same, "for the love of art," they said, but in reality because it was a good advertisement to teach the Donna Lisa. While the masters were there, the Marchesa sat in the room.

But this afternoon she had been closeted with the Marchese, and they had talked business. Was it really necessary that the Giotto should go? That was what the Marchesa wanted to know, and her husband did not leave her long in doubt: things were even gloomier than she had imagined.

After all, it wasn't such a bad idea that of Lisa's marrying old Count della Braccia. Soon she would lose her looks, and then even the old Count would not look at her.

Neither of them wanted her to go into a convent, and then even to the convent it was better to carry money with one.

Could they economise a little more, that was what the Marchesa was wondering, the while she knew that they couldn't. To be sure, they might do without three servants, but if they sent one away the others would go; already they complained of the work, although there were no stairs to go up and down. They complained of the food.

If only they could let the Palazzo! There was the old Count della Braccia who didn't need money, and he had let his for an enormous price to an American, because he could not bear to live there alone. Instead he had rooms at the hotel. What would he do if he married? She supposed he would live there again.

And every now and then the Marchese looked out across the canal, or opened the door and listened for a bell. If Savielli didn't keep his promise, then indeed he did not know what he should do, and the Marchesa tried to comfort him.

If the worst came to the worst, they would have to borrow of Della Braccia—after all, an old friend like that!

But the very idea exasperated the Marchese. If he had not asked to marry Lisa, but now that he had done so, it made borrowing from him impossible.

Presently a bell rang out, and in a moment or two the Marchese went out into the hall.

"Who was that?" he asked Giuseppe. "It it is any one for me show them into the library."

But Giuseppe put on his most innocent air.

"It was nothing, only the gondolier who came to see if Donna Lisa would go out; if not, he would go home for an hour, his wife was expecting to be confined."

"Yes, yes, let him go," said the Marchese impatiently. How was it possible that people could go on having babies while he awaited Savielli?

Then the Marchesa came to the door.

"Where is Donna Lisa?" she asked. She didn't want her, only she asked from habit.

"In her room." Giuseppe was magnificent in his mendacity; he had just shown Savielli to the little back room.

"Who is that talking?"

"Oh, it is only Anina; her brother has brought some vegetables from the country, and she never can let him go without talking till midnight."

The Marchese went back into his wife's room and they began discussing again. I was nearly dark now, and Viola brought twoil lamps and set one on the table and or

on the chest of drawers, then she lit two candles.

"No; no candles to-night."

To-day they would even give up candles, thought the Marchesa.

This time it was the Then another ring. Count della Braccia. Giuseppe hesitated. The Marchesa had said not at home to any one, but as a rule the old Count was always admitted, even when there had been a death. Only to-night Giuseppe did not want him to come in; he might find out that Donna Lisa was with Savielli. He told the Count that the Marchesa was lying down, that she was not receiving. The Count had known Giuseppe as long as he had known the Di Val Morenos, and the Count often gave him a present because he was such a good old servant, and he looked as if he didn't get enough to He would give him a gold piece, and say: "Take good care of Donna Lisa, Giuseppe." Giuseppe was devoted to him.

"Ah, what is the matter?"

The Count della Braccia had noticed that something was always the matter when the Marchesa was not receiving, and had a headache. He had wondered once or twice if she did the washing.

And in a mysterious voice, drawing him a

little to one side of the doorstep, Giuseppe told him as a great secret that the Giotto was to be sold that evening, that both the Marchese and the Marchesa were disperati.

"The Giotto!" Even Della Braccia could see the gravity of such a state of affairs. "Where is Donna Lisa?"

The old man hesitated.

"I think she is in the picture gallery; she has been all day in front of the Madonna. It will break her heart when it goes."

He mentioned the furthest corner of the house, thinking her elsewhere.

"Well, I will go and see."

The old Count seized the banisters with one hand and leaned on his stick; mercifully the couple were engaged in such a heated discussion that they did not hear him. He dragged his gouty leg up the great flight of marble steps, and Giuseppe watched him.

"If only he would buy it for them!" he said to himself. What was the good of having a friend like the Count della Braccia if they couldn't borrow from him, instead of that infidel Savielli? Giuseppe shared the opinion of all the poorer classes of Venice with regard to Savielli. Presently he went to the study to warn the Signorina that the Count was there. As he went along the

hall, he heard the old Count murmuring as he went upstairs:

"The Giotto, per Dio! the Giotto!"

For precisely what Giuseppe wanted him to do he was wondering whether he could do. He realised that parting with the Giotto was a tragedy in the Di Val Moreno family. It was like losing a landmark, a tradition. Why, he remembered it in the old Marchese's time! What on earth can he have done to get into this muddle? he asked himself as he went upstairs, pausing here and there to regain his breath.

"If only he were not so infernally proud!"

And as he went upstairs, Giuseppe opened the door of the little room cautiously, lest the very opening of the door should allow their voices to be heard but, per Bacco! the room was empty.

He swore to himself as only an Italian can swear. He was an old fool: he had sent the old Count upstairs, and, of course, they were there, looking at the Giotto. "He wants to smell the meat before he tastes it," he said to himself; "he wants to see that it is there. As long as the Nobilissima doesn't let him take it away!"

When the old Count reached the top of

the stairs he paused: again the idea of the Giotto going away upset him. He remembered it when he was quite a child, and how often he had seen it since. He had often said that it was a little like Lisa.

"Not that she is at all like a Madonna," he would add. As a matter of fact, he didn't care for the Madonna type. It was the life, the audacity of Lisa which pleased him. Oh! they had laughed together once or twice when she was alone with him for a few minutes, for with him they trusted Lisa even alone.

It seemed to him that he heard an inner door open and shut. He hoped that he wasn't going to come face to face with the Marchese and Savielli. It would look like impertinence his having come up here without permission. He had yielded to an impulse, but he was always grand seigneur, and didn't like to look as if he took liberties with friends.

"Well, after all these years if I can't tell him I want to buy that Giotto, why, I'd do it just to cheat Savielli." The old Count laughed to himself. Savielli held several post obits of his son's, bills that were to be met after the old Count's death. Savielli had tried to get him to pay them.

He opened the door of the salone noiselessly.

There, on her knees before the Madonna, knelt Donna Lisa.

He was not a religious man, although he gave a good deal to the Church, prompted by the superstition which holds so large a place in the mind of the Romanist. At the sight of the young girl kneeling before the picture which was so soon to go, he crossed himself. How young she looked! It was nearly dark now, but the glow behind the campanile reflected across the water outlined her young profile, the sensitive lips moving in prayer, and made the waves of her goldenbrown hair look like little flames of holy fire.

She moved as he came near, and, as if she was still under the influence of some emotion, hardly knowing what she was doing, she threw her arms around the old man's neck and burst into tears.

"They are going to take it away!" she sobbed.

But it was not entirely for the Giotto that she sobbed. Suddenly it seemed to her that life was very dark and sad. She was, oh so tired of poverty and of never being able to satisfy cravings which the inherited instinct of luxury inspired!

He stroked her hair. It was a pleasant

sensation to have this warm, fresh, young thing leaning against him, and he was pleased that in her grief she turned to him.

- "Nonsense, nonsense! They shall do nothing of the kind."
- "But how can we help it?" Then she told him all she knew, all she had done.
- "What! you saw Savielli—you spoke to him?" The old Count was quite excited.
- "Yes; but I beg of you do not tell papa and mama, they will be so angry."
- "But you have courage, child." Then he asked: "And you sent him away?"
  - "Yes, but he is coming to-morrow."
- "And to-morrow what were you going to do?"
  - "I-I was going to ask you to buy it."

The old Count burst out laughing. He was delighted. Then he grew grave.

"But your father—ah, that is the trouble! He is proud as Lucifer."

Lisa took his hand.

"Come and sit here."

She led him to a settee on which there was room for two. They were facing the canal, and already the lamps were being lit, and the lights were beginning to quiver like pale yellow ribands in the water.

"I will tell you; are you listening?"



"Yes, yes, tell me."

The old man was growing quite excited. This was quite an interesting event in his life, to save the Giotto for little Lisa.

"You told mama that you wanted to marry me—well, I will marry you, and you will give me the Giotto as a wedding present."

She spoke gleefully, almost mischievously, like a child. After all, she was not yet eighteen.

"Ah, my child!"

The old man was silent a long time. It was a great joy to him to think that she was willing to marry him, but the way she said it! He was afraid that she was only doing it on account of the Giotto. He feared that perhaps she was mercenary. He had hoped to woo her gradually, to find out if she could ever care for him. He knew one or two women who still cared very much for him although he had white hair, yet the idea, how pleasing it was! This damned Giotto, if it hadn't been for the picture he would have known if she cared for him. Now he would never know.

And she felt suddenly cold. He didn't want to marry her, he was only joking; and she what had she done?

"Ah, you were only joking when you said that to mama!"

"No, my child, no. I think we should be very happy, we two, you and I. Yes, I want very much to marry you; but, carissima, you are giving yourself in exchange for the Giotto—that I don't like."

The girl was silent for a moment. She knew so little of love that it seemed to her that she loved this old man who had always been so kind, and who was so good-looking—every one said so—and then to be quite grown up at last, and to be taken care of by him always, always!

With a gesture full of grace, half of childish confidence, yet with the dawning in it of a woman's surrender, she laid her head on his breast.

- "No, no; I love you very dearly," she said.
- "Is that true?—ah, my child, you make me so happy. An old fogey like me—why, it's like the millennium!" Then with extraordinary chivalry he went on: "But all that has nothing to do with the Giotto, you know. First we will settle that, and then in three months six months we will talk of the other matter; then, you see, you will know if it was for the Giotto or not."
- "Once a promise is always a promise," she said, lifting her head a little proudly. And he recognised the blood of the Di Val Morenos,



the spirit which made the Marchese sell the Giotto rather than borrow or owe the bank.

"No, no; you have made no promise, Lisa dear, no promise at all. I would not buy you with fifty Giottos. Of all that we will talk another time. Now about Savielli—at what time is he coming?"

They talked till it was quite dark, and once the old man carried her hand to his lips.

"No, it would be too much happiness for an old buffer like me," he murmured.

Presently some one came into the room hurriedly, stepping from the dark landing right into the light streaming from a lamp opposite the Palazzo.

"Lisa, Lisa, where are you? What on earth . . .?"

It was the Marchese di Val Moreno.

# CHAPTER V

AND for the next few months Donna Lisa went about like one given over to a pleasant dream. Those were sun-spangled months. which resembled the sun-spangled canal in the summer-time. It had been January when the Di Val Morenos went to Venice, for they always spent Christmas there. Now it was March. Only two months, and yet the whole aspect of Donna Lisa's life was changed, at least outwardly. It was not that she had actually met Love, and spread out wide-open arms to clasp him to her breast, and felt that that embrace altered every inner emotion of her being; but she had met with kindness and petting, and being made much of, which is the best facsimile of love, and far safer than passion, and she had revived in the sunlight of luxury, as a delicate plant revives in warm water. Donna Lisa had a kind heart, and it was good to see the weight of constant anxiety taken off the shoulders of those she loved. The atmosphere of the Palazzo was

changed, and with the change Donna Lisa blossomed out into new beauty, as if she merged from one loveliness into another, as if from tender grace she glided into brilliancy. She had always been a lovely girl, always had a bright smile. Now her eyes sparkled, and her whole aspect became radiant, and her mother and father wondered whether after all she didn't really love the old Count. There had been stranger things than that to happen.

But as yet Donna Lisa was not engaged, although all Venice had got hold of the story; no one quite knew how. Presently the old friends came to call in order to ask questions, or to try and find out. The Principessa Forli, who had known Lisa since she was quite a baby, came quite flurried to ask the Marchesa what she was thinking about, to allow such a thing.

- "Better let her go into a convent than that," she said to the Marchesa, "then, at least, there will be no scandal."
- "No scandal! But what nonsense are you talking, cara mia?"
- "Of course scandal. Lisa, beautiful as she is—of course she will have a lover."

The Principessa went away leaving the Marchesa in a fearful state of mind.

"A scandal." There had never been any in the family of Di Val Moreno—not in the late centuries. In the old days they didn't call it scandal when a wife was unfaithful, or a great noble gambled away all his fortune, or cheated at cards. But after the Princess had gone, she called Lisa, and asked her whether she was quite sure that she wanted to marry the old Count.

"Supposing that one day you meet some young man and fall in love with him?"

Donna Lisa blushed. She had thought of that.

"Then, of course, I shall remember how good he has been, Della Braccia, and I shall not think of any one else."

"That is well spoken, my child, but---"

The Marchesa felt that it was better not to discuss it further. There was something about Donna Lisa which she could not understand, something half childish, and yet underneath which, one seemed to strike against something hard as steel.

"Well, anyhow, you have time to think about it, to change your mind," she said, comforting herself, while she thought to give her daughter a loophole of escape.

Donna Lisa knew that she could change her mind if she wished. The old Count had refused

even to consider the marriage till the spring. He had no intention of buying her with the Giotto, and then being disillusioned with his bargain. They thought this magnificent of him, but they didn't know how much he was thinking of himself in this. He had no intention of becoming the laughing-stock of Venice, after being one of its most well-regarded citizens; he had no intention of his son being able to talk of "the old fool"; and he was old enough man of the world to know what happens, as a rule, when winter mates with spring. Goodness me, there were enough unhappy marriages when both were of the same age. Just because he was old, just because his career had from a worldly point of view been glorious, except with regard to his son—and nearly all Venice took the father's side—he wasn't going to have it said that he was in his second childhood, and that he deserved all that happened to him in the way of deception.

He wanted to end his life happily, and he thought that Donna Lisa held in her pretty little hands the elements of happiness, but he was going to be very careful. This winter he would see a great deal of her, and watch, and for her sake, as well as his own, he wasn't going to engage himself, so that she could still change her mind, and he not appear

to have been thrown over. When people asked him if it were true, he laughed.

"One might do worse than marry Donna Lisa," he answered with something of the breezy indifference with which he had answered his mother nearly fifty years ago, when she had wanted him to marry this girl or that, of the daughters of her friends. Girls who were now old ladies, wearing wigs, or with snow-white locks, with grand-children of their own, or who had long since been laid to rest in the cemetery.

"Ah, you old fox!" his friends said. "You think nothing is too good for you. Donna Lisa, per Dio! eighteen years old, and the prettiest girl in Venice! You are buying her as you would buy an estate or a picture or a jewel, but possessions with hearts can't be bought. It is a dangerous bauble for an old man."

Yet, just because the whole atmosphere of her life had changed, Donna Lisa appeared to him more desirable than ever, for her atmosphere had become a good deal more what the atmosphere of Di Val Moreno's daughter ought to be. Della Braccia insisted that she should go out into society this winter. She must see something of the world, she must meet young men, he told her parents. "I will not have her marry me with her eyes shut." And in

vain the Marchesa exclaimed that she could not afford to entertain, to dress Donna Lisa. As he had obtained his own way with the Giotto, so he now obtained it by insisting that she should allow him to meet the expenses of changed conditions.

Her parents had been very angry at first with Lisa about the Giotto, although they only knew part of what happened. They never knew till years afterwards that she had received Savielli, or that she had asked the Count to save the Giotto. She had always been grateful to him for having kept her secret.

Her father had been very annoyed that evening when he came into the picture gallery and found his daughter there, seated on the settee with the old Count. Naturally he was like one of the family, but to sit there in the dark like a little serving-maid! And yet he had not been able to keep from laughing when Lisa said in her innocent way:

"But there were no lights, papa."

And he had almost quarrelled for life with the old Count, when he suggested that he wanted to give the picture to Lisa.

At first it had caused the Marchese more pain to think that it had come to this, that he should accept money from a friend, than parting with the Giotto.



Then it was that Lisa had laid her hand on her father's arm, and said:

"But, papa, I am going to marry Count della Braccia, and the Giotto is my wedding gift."

But one grows accustomed to everything, and it was good, after all, to see the Giotto still in its place day after day; and the old Count had done everything in such a charming way. He had kept Donna Lisa's secret about Savielli, and he knew that the Marchese would never stand his going to the bank; instead, he pretended to buy the picture from the American.

"I find that the American was going to give a hundred thousand *lire* for the picture," he wrote, sending a note with a cheque in it to the Marchese. "You will not deny me the pleasure of buying it for our little Lisa."

"He certainly is a charming old man," the Marchesa said to her husband as she caressed the cheque, then handed it back to him.

"A hundred thousand lire!" It was many years since a hundred thousand lire had found its way to the Palazzo di Val Moreno, and the loan at the bank was only fifty thousand lire. The Marchese was for sending the rest back, but his wife persuaded him to keep it. She could not bear to see the vision of paid bills

and new clothes and reinforced existence, floating away into space again.

"You will offend him bitterly," she said. "After all, why should you not have what Savielli was going to have?" And the Marchese kept it, though it went against the grain.

"We shall need money for Lisa's wedding," his wife told him; and even now she sighed, for fifty thousand *lire* wouldn't go far for the corbeille de noces of the only daughter of Di Val Moreno.

It is always the first victory which is the hard one.

Now the old Count found it much easier to persuade the Marchesa. He wanted more luxury to surround his future wife. Already it seemed to him as if she belonged to him.

"If she has all she wants, she will know better why she is marrying me. I do not want her to marry me for my money; I want her to be happy, to do as other girls do, then, if she still wishes to marry me, I shall know that she cares for me."

The Marchesa wondered how it was that the old Count imagined that such a young girl could care for an old man. She kept up the story to every one that Lisa was devoted

to him, that she had always been devoted as a child; but within, she had a heart-rending misgiving which she dared not communicate the gist of, even to her husband. She was doing this to save the family. The only comfort of the whole thing was that the old Count could not live for ever-that one day Lisa would be free to marry as her heart dictated; only what the Marchesa prayed was, that she would have the courage to wait till he did die, that there might be no scandal meanwhile. Eight, ten years she might have to wait, but after that, she would only be thirty: she could still make a marriage of the heart. When he was only their old friend for nothing on earth would they have had him die. Now, as the husband of Lisa, they would be resigned if he died the day after the wedding. It would not be possible—the Marchesa said to herself, that it would break Lisa's heart if he died. She was fond of him as she was of her father—a grandfather almost, but as a husband "questo no."

And in answer to the old Count's arguments that he should be allowed to contribute to the welfare of the family, that Donna Lisa should enjoy all the pleasures suitable to her age, the Marchesa would say:

"Ah, my dear Della Braccia, and then if,

after all, she changed her mind we should be in your debt."

"Ah, nonsense!" said the Count. "If she marries me, well, that will be part of her dowry; if she doesn't, then are you going to tell me that I can't do something for Lisa? She is like my own child: I should have left her something in any case. Well, let that come out of it."

The Marchesa sighed at his generosity, but the human heart is a strange creation. Since he had been going to leave her something, what a pity that he had not died and done so earlier, so that she could marry after her own heart, or at least after that of her parents. It was an ignoble thought, but the love of a mother is like that, prone to the most evil thoughts at times.

But to Lisa it seemed quite natural that the old Count should wish her to enter now, into the enjoyment his money could procure for her. She took life as it came, without realising the rapid transition. It was good to have pretty dresses, and to see the Palazzo lit up again at night with many lamps, to have the big salon thrown open, and to see people coming and going.

Only to the Colombis, her great friends and cronies, did the Marchesa reveal the

source of their increase of good fortune, and the Colombis were too great friends to betray Naturally Venice talked. It was strange that good fortune had come to the Di Val Morenos. They supposed that those mines of his which had nearly ruined him, had after all been discovered to have salt. Lisa would marry some young man of good family. The young girls who had always soothed their jealousy of Lisa's beauty with the pitying assurance that she would never marry, that soon the dangerous rivalry of her beauty would be hidden behind convent walls, began to grow nervous again. Lisa without a soldo was one thing, but Lisa with wealth added to her beauty, became a danger.

And with the young men it was the same thing. Hitherto they had seen very little of Lisa except gliding past in her gondola, or walking on the Lido with her maid, and occasionally—very rarely—at receptions, always dressed in the same white frock, which she strove to give a varied aspect to, by different coloured ribands or fresh flowers, but which every time hung more limply, and grew more ivory-coloured. Now she went to all the dances, charmingly if simply dressed, and always she carried a magnificent bouquet, which it was rumoured the old Count della

Braccia had sent her, although the engagement was not announced.

Now suddenly she became the fashion, so far as a young girl can become the fashion. All the young men of Venice called on Sunday afternoon, and the Marchesa sighed.

If only they had had enough money Lisa could have married a man of good family and wealth, and yet young, full of the passion and fire of life, and they would have had children! It was dreadful to think that the present activity and merriment were founded on such a fragile basis as Della Braccia's infatuation, and that if the girl changed her mind it would all change in an instant like Cinderella's pumpkin.

And all the time Donna Lisa was unaware that the old Count was watching her—watching to see what effect wealth had upon her, and whether she took a fancy to any young man, whether she really cared for him. And he was bound to confess, as days glided into weeks, and weeks took on the aspect of months, that her behaviour to him was irreproachable. There had even been a moment which had brought back one of the thrills of his early youth, and warmed his heart as if with new wine.

It was the festa of Santa Lisa, her patron

saint, and the old Count insisted that she should have a dance at her parents' house. He was as excited about it as if he were a *débutante* instead of she. It was to be the most magnificent ball of the season, and there would be a cotillion, and he would provide the presents.

"You are a dear!" Lisa had said; and she had thrown her arms around him and kissed him.

The old Count was never quite sure if he enjoyed her kisses; they were given so spontaneously, so naturally. If he had been a young man, he would not have been allowed to kiss her once, and she wouldn't have thought of kissing him. Perhaps he would have touched her finger-tips once now and then with his moustache, and later he would have had to entreat a kiss, which she would have given grudgingly, with downcast eyes, and heaving bosom, and a blush on her cheeks. She kissed him as a child might, and he was afraid that she would always kiss him like that.

Once he had said to her: "If I were a young man, Lisa, you would not kiss me till we were married;" and she had laughed, and said in her naïve way: "No; that is why it is so nice that you are not young."



81

He was only half reassured. Of late he had asked himself whether it would not be better to give up the idea. He was a very wise old man, and as he saw how popular she was, he asked himself if it would not be a nobler deed to give her a dot, and let her marry whom she liked.

Once he had said this to her, and she told him: "Oh! if you don't want to marry me, of course——" And he had taken her hand in his, and made her raise her eyes to his. "Are you sure, Lisa mia, that you want to marry me?" And she had returned his look with a sincere expression. "Yes, yes, I want to marry you. You, and no one but you. Is that enough?"

When she spoke like that, he grew happy again. He was as much in love as a boy, but he did not want to look ridiculous. He was afraid of making love to her, lest he should disgust her, but when he saw her enter the room or coming downstairs his heart beat as if he were twenty. Lately he told himself that even if he had a rude awakening, he would at least have had a pleasant dream.

After all, he said to himself, "When woman has gone out of a man's life, he might as well die at once."

And on the morning of her festa he had sent her magnificent presents—a row of lovely pearls, and a mantilla of old Venetian point, and flowers and bonbons, and on the bed in one of the empty rooms lay a dress, which had arrived the night before, from the best dressmaker in Venice.

When she went into her mother's room carrying her gifts she looked radiant.

"Ah, mama, I am so happy!" she said, and her mother once more relegated her doubts and anxieties to the pigeon-hole of disagreeable things, which are not wanted. A new creed was fashioning itself in the Marchesa's brain. Hitherto she had thought that the young only craved love. It was so in all the poems and books and songs, but she was beginning to think that all they wanted was presents. Was it the thought of the presents, was it gratitude, which made her do that night the one thing he would have wanted her to do, and the doing of which rejoiced his heart, or did she really love him?

The cotillion had begun now, and the old Count would not dance it with her.

"I'm too old," he said, when she went up to him.

"Is it not unkind of you not to ask me to

dance the cotillion? I have already refused three invitations, because I thought you would want to be my partner."

"No, no, I am too old. I want to watch you. Keep me a flower."

She pouted at him for a moment, and finally accepted the Count Ugolino Vremi, reputed the fastest man and best dancer in Venice.

The old Count watched her with some anxiety. He had noticed that Vremi never took his eyes off her the whole evening.

Half-way through the cotillion was a figure in which the girls were placed in the middle of the room, with a little fish-hook of silver tinsel, and three men were to sit in a row waiting till she threw her hook, and caught the one she wanted to dance with as best she could, in the collar or the coat.

Three came up, then three more, finally the Count Vremi and Leonardo Norini, and the young Duca d'Abrazzio. Vremi scanned her face anxiously: she had already allowed the last two sets of men to go away, naturally she would choose himself, Vremi thought. He was also the most conceited man in Venice, probably one of the best looking. She hesitated a moment, but not on account of Vremi; she had known Leonardo Norini since she was a child, she did not like to send him

away, but all the same she did not throw out her little hook.

Vremi bit his lip as he turned away, and the old Count smiled to himself. He would have liked to go up, but they would all laugh at him at his age. Now three more made their way towards her, but instead she walked across the room and threw her little hook over the heads of those seated around, and it caught in the old Count's buttonhole as he leaned against the wall, his arms folded, his handsome head illumined by the lights above, making the white locks shine like snow beneath the sun.

"Ah!" He gave a little pleased exclamation and pushed through the throng and seized her in his arms.

"Adorabile!" he murmured in her ear, while every one made a remark. Some even clapped their hands, others laughed, one or two sneered.

"Brava!" said her mother as she passed by. If she chose him out like this, she certainly cared for him.

And for all the twinges of gout in his leg, he spun her round as if he were a boy. He had been a famous dancer in his day, and he held her securely.

"Ah, stop," she said presently. "You take



my breath away. Dio! but you are a splendid dancer."

After that it seemed useless to try and hide from the world that she was going to marry the old man. She had told Venice herself.

### CHAPTER VI

COUNT UGOLINO VREMI and Leonardo Norini were on their way to the Café Florian to have luncheon together, and as they glided along, raising their hats every two or three minutes to some acquaintance—a pretty woman, or a comrade, or a priest perhaps—they discussed the dance at the Palazzo di Val Moreno, and the strange behaviour of Donna Lisa.

"It really looks as if there was something in all this talk of her marrying old Della Braccia." Leonardo Norini spoke very despondently.

"My dear fellow, were you born yesterday? He is keeping the whole family, and she has to look as if she liked him."

Vremi hadn't got over Lisa's apparent indifference to his attentions. He spoke viciously as he bit the end off his cigar and threw the end into the canal.

Leonardo Norini's face flushed.

"You don't know the Di Val Morenos, or you wouldn't talk like that."

Vremi didn't want to quarrel with Leonardo.

He hadn't so many friends that he could afford to lose this, the most respectable of them, and Vremi was very heavily in debt, and Norini, although not rich, was generous. Vremi was going to get a luncheon out of him now, and who could tell what after that? They would play a game or two, and perhaps Norini would lose—Vremi needed a few *louis* to-day badly.

"Well, of course you are an old friend, but you must say that it is odd, a beautiful girl like that and an old man like Della Braccia; and then this sudden improvement in their affairs. If they were not your friends I should have said that the old man was—well——" He broke off.

"It is well that you do not finish what you were about to say," Leonardo answered angrily. "If you had I should ask you to put me down at once. The Di Val Morenos are the proudest family in Venice, and you know if we Venetians are proud."

Vremi laughed. Of late he had had to put pride aside a good deal.

"My dear fellow, the age of pride is over. There is a time for everything: the iron age is over, so is the age of pride."

Norini laughed. He did not want to quarrel with Vremi either, but he was not going to hear his friends abused. He had played with

Lisa as a child, and always loved her. His father's place touched the old Count's at Le Cadore, and he often saw her when she came over with her parents to spend the day, for the old Count was very hospitable and gave luncheons to his neighbours.

"If it was the son, Luigi, now; but Luigi even, is too old for her."

"And Luigi, he wouldn't make as good a husband as the old fellow."

"Oh, he is not so bad as you think."

Vremi owed young Luigi money, and he rather liked his wife.

"You don't know all I do about him."

"They say the old man is a screw, and won't give his son anything." Vremi knew that the money he had borrowed had been advanced by Savielli on post obits.

"Ah, you know nothing about it; he has paid his debts twenty times."

"Is that so? Well, he tells a different story." Vremi spoke indifferently; he didn't care so long as Luigi didn't bother him to return the money; and to keep him in a good temper, he kept in with the wife, who was a shrew, and ruled Luigi with her hot temper. "Well, he won't pay them any more if he is going to marry Donna Lisa. I shouldn't wonder if they had

children, too. Goodness, he danced like a young man!"

Each word of Vremi's was like a sword thrust in Leonardo's breast. Always he had dreamed of Lisa for his wife. It was one of those dreams one indulges in, while one recognises that probably they will always be dreams. One day, perhaps, he would have the courage to ask her parents to let him marry her, but before then he would have to distinguish himself, and chances of distinguishing oneself were rare in Italy of late years. Unfortunately the Norinis were not extremely wealthy, nor of noble, although of good old family. Like most of the Venetians of old family, they had a country place at Le Cadore, and a large Palazzo on the canal at Venice, but the Di Val Morenos would look higher than that for their only daughter. For the last two years Leonardo, who had two brothers, had urged his father to let him work-do something, go and explore, travel, or go into trade even. He had more modern ideas than his father. But always his father had made an objection; lately, however, he had seemed less opposed to the idea, and as Norini heard of the rapidly diminishing fortunes of the Di Val Morenos, his hopes had risen. One day if he could only make a fortune,

and if the Di Val Morenos were completely ruined, they would not refuse him Donna Lisa. Meanwhile the fortune remained mirage, and so did the wonderful business he was to undertake. The Norinis were blacks, and they didn't want their son to serve the king, so nearly all the professions were closed to him; besides, one couldn't make money as a diplomat, or a soldier or a sailor. Of late he had been studying medicine: there was money to be made as a doctor, and the profession is respected as it should be in Italy. If he could become a specialist, or discover some wonderful cure for consumption or cancer, and become one of the foremost men of science, he might make a fortune. Meanwhile the misfortunes of the Di Val Morenos were his chief source of happiness; they seemed to bring Lisa more within his grasp. Now to-day, after the dance, he was very depressed. It seemed to him that they had become suddenly wealthy.

The only drop of comfort lay in the manner in which she had repulsed Vremi; that, at least, showed that she was not attracted by dissipators, and Leonardo was of a serious, studious turn of mind.

But the way she had chosen out Della Braccia caused him a good deal of thought this morning. Was it only as a friend chooses out an old friend, or was she really going to marry him?

He could never bear it, he told himself, if she came to live next door as the Countess della Braccia. He would have to go away and travel. It would be agony. And then it was so unlike her. He remembered words she had let drop when they had escaped surveillance for a few moments and managed to talk, how she had said:

"I would rather go into a convent than marry without love."

But that was two years ago, now she was grown up. And they had been poor, too, when she said that. How awful if she were marrying this old man for his money! It seemed like it: and that was the worst of all to him, for it altered the character of the girl which he had always admired. Once the wild idea flashed across his brain: what if she were in love with him as she had once thought, and was marrying because he had not asked her. because nobody had asked her, because she was poor? The thought made him gloomy, because it made him feel his impotence. year he had meant to try and get closer to her thoughts, to her heart, when she came to Le Cadore; but, if gossip spoke truly for once, it would be too late when she came to

Le Cadore in the spring, it would be too late. Oh, what pain there was in love!

And as if the same thoughts had crossed Vremi's mind, he exclaimed, suddenly breaking the silence which had fallen upon them:

"It's disgusting to think of a girl like that marrying an old man like that, who has had affaires by the score, and mistresses by the hundred!"

He told Norini one or two anecdotes Luigi had told him about his father, and the idea of Lisa's marrying Della Braccia sickened him.

Yes, Vremi's thoughts were a little like those of Leonardo Norini, only less pure. He felt a great admiration for Donna Lisa—a passion almost, had awakened for her beauty last night, but with it a rage against her for her contempt, and a contempt for her easy acquiescence in her parents' scheme for her marriage with an old man, on account of his wealth. For nothing on earth would he have married a poor girl, but he thought women ought to be different, and that every girl, poor or wealthy, ought to be glad to marry Him, Vremi. He had been spoiled by the young married women of Venice, who enjoyed flirting with him, and by the mothers of daughters, who, while they knew his fast way of living, would yet, some of them, have given him their daughters

because of his name and position. He had been wondering, during the long silence, whether after all they were richer than they He didn't think so; he was firmly convinced that it was Della Braccia's money which had caused the improved aspect of affairs, and his thoughts were vile ones.

He would like to make the girl take a fancy to him, and then after her marriage it would be amusing to filch her from the old man. How pleased Luigi would be!

"If she had a son how angry Luigi will be!" he said presently.

The Di Val Morenos had sunk into obscurity of late, owing to the depression of their fortunes and their quiet way of living. The dance at the Palazzo and Lisa's beauty, seen for the first time in a proper setting, made the topic a new one, which they were in no hurry to relinquish; they had come into fashion again, as it were, this morning.

As Vremi said scoffingly: "It had never been light enough at the Palazzo till last night to see how pretty she was."

This morning all Venice was discussing them, and Lisa's singular act in choosing out the old man with her fish-hook.

She might as well have turned round and

said, "I have caught him," said one. "Oh, that will never come to anything," said another.

"It is very wicked. I cannot understand Bianca di Val Moreno," said the Princess Forli, who had three daughters, two of whom were unmarried, and who was now beginning to think that she had been rather a fool not to make a marriage between one of her daughters and the old Count.

"She will be counting the days till his death," said another, "and that brings ill luck."

But Leonardo Norini couldn't bear discussing it with Vremi, he felt too miserable, and he was glad when they reached the Florian. During luncheon he was a poor companion. Something was outlining itself in his mind, moving slowly into shape as a cloud moves slowly but steadily towards another on the horizon.

"I believe I will try my luck—try to save her," he said to himself as he walked home by the little cobbled back streets, where the irregular top-heavy houses, looked as if they would topple over into the street at any moment.

"I will try and see her before her marriage—get a note to her, or throw flowers on to the balcony," Vremi was saying to himself. Suddenly to the lounger it seemed as if a

new and pleasant pastime had arisen on a dull horizon. "Luigi will help me; he told me himself. He would do anything to rile the old man."

And while they were talking, Lisa was having a long afternoon sleep after her dance, a pleasant, dreamless sleep, from which she awoke refreshed and with a feeling of bien être, at the thought that soon she would belong to the dear old man who tried always to make her happy.

And the old Count, seated on the balcony outside his nice rooms at the hotel, was dreaming too, the while he gazed out on to Venice, not as the visitor, the tourist looks on Venice. with wonder and amazement and awe at its tranquil solemnity, but with the feeling that it was part of himself; and that in a city of dreams, the dream of marrying Donna Lisa was natural, part of the poetry and grace and easy gliding along life, which is like the gliding along of the gondola at night on the breast of the deep, mysterious canal. "Love and life" the waters seem to say this afternoon. "Love and life." Yes, love seemed to hover close, but life-ah me! if he were only twenty years younger even, and could look forward to many years with Donna Lisa. If only he was marrying for the first time, and could look forward

to dandling her children on his knee, instead of having to constantly be reminded of the existence of Luigi, what would not life still hold; instead it was only a graceful ending to a triumphant day, in which it seemed now as if the death of his first wife and the disappointment about Luigi, had been the only two thorns. Life had not treated him so badly, and now that he was old, it was beginning to spoil him; but what pleased him most of all was that the dancing had not hurt him. Later in the evening he had danced again; a polka of all things. Lisa had insisted; and this morning he had not felt a twinge of gout. It was almost miraculous.

"If only my hair were not so white," he said, passing his hands over his head, "I could be a young man again. Ah, my blood is not so cold yet."

He waved his hand to a charmingly pretty woman who went by, and the look she cast him from languorous eyes raised his conceit again.

"I shall make her happy," he said to himself. Then his face clouded over. "You old fool!" It is the last flutter of the bird before it dies. An hour later he went to his notary in his gondola.

"It was not wise," the notary said, but all



the same he had done as he wished. "Now, she will marry some one else," the notary had said, "or she will wish for your death."

"Poison me, perhaps." The old Count had laughed. "Well, we shall see. That, after all, is as good a death as another, to die by beautiful young hands. Eh, Franzoni, you are jealous, eh?"

He had gone away laughing, with a great packet of papers in his hands.

In the evening, now, the Marchese and the Marchesa often left them for an hour together, he and Donna Lisa.

"At his age, after all!" the Marchese would say, glad to get to his library. And the Marchesa laughed.

"He does not make love to her, either; they just talk, Lisa tells me, just as if we were there," his wife told the Marchese; and, as a rule, now that she could afford a fire and candles, one of her cronies came to sit with her in the little drawing-room next to the big one which had been closed for so long.

And this evening the old Count took out the papers and read them to Lisa, watching her face as he did so.

"What do I understand of all this? You must talk to papa," she said, laughing.

97

"But I want you to understand, my dear. It is very important. If I die——"

She laid her hand gently in his.

"I don't want you to die."

He raised the hand to his lips. He believed this child loved him.

- "But I might-I am an old man, Lisa."
- "I will take such care of you that you will live for ever," she said.
- "Now listen to me. I have left you all my fortune."
- "But what is the good of that, now? If I inherit it, it will mean that you are dead, and I shall be miserable."

Her words enchanted him. The old are so easily deluded. But she thought that she spoke the truth.

"But I have left you this, even if I don't marry you; and you see I have given you a dot during my lifetime, so that if you want to marry some one else you can do so. I shall not be angry, my Lisa; I want you to be happy—not to have to marry me. Sometimes, carissima, I fear you are marrying me for your parents' sake, or because you wish me to be happy. I will not have you sacrifice yourself."

"You mean——" She looked at him confused.

"I mean that you are a rich little woman, that if you wish you can marry whom you will, that you will not suffer ever again if you do not marry me."

The anxiety in his voice pierced. It was the last test which was to set his mind at rest. If she did not care for him, if they were coercing her to marry him, then it was better so; it would be a last good act to have enriched this charming child of the decadent house of Di Val Moreno. He gave her by these deeds half his fortune now, and half at his death.

She was silent now, and he felt desperately anxious. The awakening, how bitter it might be, the while he would not blame her for her sincerity.

"You are too good, too good," she said; then she raised his hand almost reverently to her lips. "I will marry no one but you," she said softly. Then she added: "And I love you."

### CHAPTER VII

After this there certainly seemed no reason why the engagement should not be announced. The old Count had, as it were, cast the last dice which was to decide his good fortune or turn scoffingly his aspirations into dead sea fruit, and he had turned up the winning number. He could hardly believe his good luck: almost it seemed to him as if there must be something behind it. It was unnatural that one so young and so beautiful should refuse such liberty as he had offered her in his generosity, and choose instead, a bondage before which even younger and less pretty women would recoil. Was it possible that this girl was of those who never know deep love or overwhelming passion, or was it possible that one of those strange exceptions to the accepted rule had come his way, and that she felt for him all she would ever feel for any man? The extent of the child-likeness of a very young girl's mind is never

fully understood by the grown-ups. Even her mother and father did not realise how utterly unsophisticated she was, principally because side by side with her child-likeness ran a strong current of common sense and practical grasp, which seemed to be quite out of keeping with it. What she had inherited principally from her father was an uprightness which is always rare, and rarer in women than in men, for their life seems to call for subterfuge, if only minor ones. She had been perfectly sincere when she told the old Count that she loved him as much as it was in her to love any one just now, and she was not aware that in her girlish penchant for Leonardo Norini, there had been contained the elements of passion. It had never occurred to her that one day she might love him ardently; on the contrary, she had considered him in the light of a brother, a companion, who might one day start forth on distant travels and never return.

But there were other influences at work in her mind, such infantile ones that they had been entirely overlooked by those around her, but all the same, for the moment compelling ones. All that she had most desired all her life was being satisfied by the old

Count, and for the moment she was like a child with a standing order on a toy shop, given after a dearth of toys. She had wanted to ride, and he promised her a horse when they went to Le Cadore; she loved jewels and flowers and bonbons, and he brought these every day. She loved the theatre and the opera, and he ordered boxes for her nearly every evening, whenever they were disengaged; and she loved pretty dresses, and she had a quantity now. Soon they would be buying her trousseau, and child that she was, it seemed to her a glorious thing to be married, to have a home, horses and carriages of her own. So far her most magnificent possession had been a little gondola of her very own, with her name painted on it. All this she was afraid would disappear if she gave up the old man who was so kind to her.

But for all her childishness, for all her simplicity and impulsiveness, she was no fool; and on the evening that he had told her that she was rich, after he had gone away, after she had talked it over with both her parents, and finally with her mother till a late hour, she was conscious that something new had come to her, something which was a terrible temptation, and in which even

her mother would abet her, if she allowed her to. Mothers certainly are impossible sometimes.

"Of course, my child, if, after all, you feel that you cannot marry him, if you were only marrying him for his money, it is better to say so at once."

Mothers certainly do say dreadful things, and when her mother said that, something almost of hate rose in the girl's heart. It was infamous of her mother. She had said truly, "a promise is always a promise"; it was, with the Di Val Morenos, and she had inherited every drop of their blood which was to spare.

Nothing was changed now, since the Giotto had been saved, except that she was far, far more in his debt than ever.

Yet as she undressed, and allowed the great rolls of hair, of that Venetian red which Titian has made immortal, to fall from her head to her neck, from her neck to her shoulders, from her shoulders to her waist, and, further, almost to her knees, as she noticed the velvety darkness of her eyes which contrasted with the hair, she said to herself, with a little sigh: "How nice it would be to be rich as I am to-night, and able to choose!" Fairy tales, which had

been her chief reading not so long ago, came to her memory, in which the familiar prince, dressed in silk and slashed short buskins of rainbow tints, and with a sword by his side, laid his home and his heart and fortune at the feet of a maiden, who in the picture books always had hair like hers.

Yes, she was beautiful—more beautiful than any picture in the gallery, with such a wonderful mutinous little nose and chin, and with lips—lips which seemed to curve at the edges and to run into two little pools at the corners. And her skin was not that of the rousse, but creamy-white; while the eyes—her father called them red eyes, occhi rossi—and declared that they were the colour of her hair; but they were not, they were large hazel eyes by day, which looked dark brown at night.

And after she had sighed, she said her prayers, and prayed that she might not think of anybody else but Della Braccia till he died, and that she might not grow proud and forget the poor because she was rich. Once she woke to the strains of a guitar under her window, and realised, with a strange wonderful feeling, that she was rich, and that somebody was serenading her; but she was too sleepy to get up and look to see who it was; besides,

she had done so often, and never been able to make out who it was.

And the day after he had deeded her so much of his fortune as he could leave away from his son, the Marchesa issued invitations for the signing of the marriage contract, and the engagement was formally announced. It was Lisa herself who had urged her parents to this. It seemed to her that after his generosity it was her duty to marry him at once. Was she afraid of changing her mind? That was what her father and mother asked themselves, what the old Count asked himself. Perhaps it was a little bit, not fear of changing her mind—that she would never do—but fear of growing accustomed to his benefits, and delaying his happiness.

Different branches of the family were invited, several priests, and the Cardinal Vanone. The latter had come to see the Marchesa a few days before. Now almost at the eleventh hour her heart misgave her, and she had written asking him to come, and she had asked him: Did he think she was doing wrong in allowing Lisa to marry this old man? It was a great comfort that he didn't think so. She felt much happier about it because he was a priest whose opinion every one respected. He was only staying in Venice

ostensibly on business for the Vatican; but it was well known that because he was Venetian he managed these little flights often, and prolonged them as much as possible.

If the child liked the old man, felt no repulsion for him, then she was not wrong, he said. She was old enough to know her own mind, said the Cardinal, who belonged to a Church which confesses children at seven, and confirms them at nine and ten.

If the young girl were being forced, urged, if she were marrying him only for his money, then it would be very wrong, but he had known of cases like this now and then, which had turned out happily. At Rome, there was the Principessa Merlani, who was very happy with her old prince. She was twenty-five, and he was as old as Noah. And when Lisa came in after she had kissed his ring and made her reverence, he drew her by both hands to the window and raised her pretty face with one hand, and said:

"Let me look and see what I can see. Do you love him, child, very much, very much?"

And Lisa answered with sincerity:

"Yes, very much. I want to marry him."

So now there was nothing more to be done but to sign the contract, for it was March now, and in April they would go to the Cadore, and if the marriage was to be at Venice it would have to be in a few weeks; but it was Lisa who said that she wanted the marriage to be in May, and the old Count thought it a pretty idea to be married in May.

"In that case the marriage must take place at Le Cadore," said her mother. For nothing on earth would any of them have changed the fashion of leaving Venice in April. And Lisa said:

"Yes, all the better. And Leonardo can come to the wedding, and Bianca." Bianca was her foster-sister, the daughter of one of the peasants.

And a strange thing happened that afternoon. Just as it was growing dusk and Giuseppe, with the assistance of a young manservant who had been added to the establishment, was lighting the lights and putting the finishing touches to the dinner-table—for there was to be a dinner-party to-night in honour of the signing of the contract, to which only intimate friends and relations were bidden—there was a knock at the door; and when Viola went to open it, for she was dressing Donna Lisa all in white, Anina handed in a letter for the Nobilissima. She did not receive many letters as a rule, but on her

engagement day there was nothing so unusual about it. Some guest wrote, no doubt, to make excuses, or to congratulate her. Instead, it seemed to have no beginning and no ending, nor any signature; a few words pencilled, which filled her with bewilderment.

"May I entreat of you," ran the lines, "to grant me a few words before your marriage—only five minutes? I shall be beneath your window to-morrow at the hour at which you go out on the canal. If you will do this drop your handkerchief into the canal, and I will follow you to the Lido. There I will arrange. For God's sake don't fail!—One who loves you distractedly."

Lisa laughed softly to herself (to what girl does not a mysterious epistle from one who loves her distractedly, appeal), although she did not give it very much attention. Italians are very amorous, very full of romance, and it was not the first time that she had had notes like this; but all the same it was amusing—even rather exciting. She slipped the note inside the neck of her low dress, and went downstairs.

The dinner was full of life and gaiety, and the signing of the contract passed off without any hitch. When the old Count signed, Lisa was standing by his side, and he looked up into her face, and asked again:

"Are you quite, quite sure, carissima?"

And she laid her slim, girlish hand on his shoulder, and said:

"Certainly I am sure; are you?"

He laughed like a boy, and every one around joined in the laughter, even the two solemn notaries. Was it likely that he wasn't sure?

There was no hesitancy in her as she signed.

Later, when every one had gone, and the Marchesa was flitting about the house giving orders, he made her sit next to him by the window and told her much about himself which he had never done before. He had a dreadful temper, he told her, and he was very jealous. She must never make him jealous, for then he might lose control of himself and say and do things for which he would be irresponsible. And Lisa laughed; why should she make him jealous, and who should he be jealous of, since there was nobody else?

"It will be a lonely life for you, my pretty one—a lonely life with an old man."

"But you will let me see my friends—papa, mama?"

"Of course, of course; but we will be always together, you and I. You see, my child, I shall not live long. I want you all to myself.

When I am dead then my little Lisa can do . as she likes."

"Don't talk of dying," she said; the idea of his death frightened her. Then with a sudden impulse she drew the letter from her bosom. It was still warm from her soft, tender body when she handed it to him. To her it seemed his right that he should see it.

He laughed; but any one observing him closely, would have seen that there was a dark expression on his face.

"Who is this from?" he asked sternly. It was the first time he had spoken like that.

"How can I tell?"

Then the mood dispelled itself, and he laughed.

"Ah, there are many who will envy me; there are many, no doubt, who love my little Lisa distractedly, but it is no good now, is it?"

And Lisa laughed too, but this time with a touch of weariness. Something had frightened her, she could never have told what, and there was a finality evoked by his last words, which chilled her.

But the next morning she had forgotten all about the letter: certainly she had no idea of dropping her handkerchief into the canal, and being followed to the Lido.

But Della Braccia did not forget. That



afternoon he accompanied her on the canal, wondering as they glided backwards and forwards who it was among the crowd who had written the letter, and who was waiting for the signal which would never come.

All Venice had turned out, for it was a glorious afternoon, and soon every one of their world would have left Venice. Vremi was there, and Norini; the Colombis and the Forlis, Don Carlos with his big dog, and many girl friends of Lisa's. It was impossible to tell who it was, but by the way he looked towards their gondola, the old Count took it into his head that it was Vremi. Only he did not tell Lisa who he thought it was. He did not want to give her ideas.

And the incident passed from her mind, for during the next couple of weeks she was very busy. The old Count had insisted that she was to have a trousseau and a corbeille worthy of the only daughter of a Di Val Moreno; and what woman does not rejoice in her daughter's trousseau! It is full of a deeper romance for the mother than for her daughter—the romance of reminiscence, fraught with experience, with a thousand experiences. If she has been happy in her marriage, she grows young again, remembering the time when she flitted from shop to shop, and dressmakers came and went.



What a thousand trivial little incidents are recalled by one garment or another! Dresses she has forgotten, come back to her mind, and she dreams again. If she has been miserable, it evolves dreads—dreads and distresses innumerable, from which she would fain protect her child.

During those days the Marchesa had no time to remember that her daughter was marrying an old man; and the daughter was absorbed by the pleasantest occupation to a woman, till at last even that palled, and she grew tired of ribands and laces, and silks and satin, of fans and parasols, and hats. At night her weary dreams were grotesque, for garments disported themselves in her visions, garments doing all sorts of extraordinary things: stiff silk petticoats walking by themselves upstairs, and lace and chiffon rising and falling like the billows of the sea, in long continuous waves which had no ending.

And every one now seemed satisfied with the marriage, even those who had been opposed to it. It was a great thing, the mothers of marriageable daughters thought, to get the beautiful Donna Lisa out of the ring of unmarried girls, and they did not grudge her her wealth, seeing the husband that went with it; while the daughters realised with some



satisfaction that the circle of eligible men had not been reduced by it, for no one had ever thought of the old Count as an eligible. It would hardly have occurred to any of the girls in Venetian society to marry him; and he would not have contemplated marriage with any of them, if he had not been thrown in a particularly close intimacy with the Di Val Morenos, and seen their surroundings.

Yet it is not true to say that every one was pleased. Vremi was disgusted and Norini was in despair; while Luigi, Della Braccia's son, was furious. He even wrote to his father, asking him if it were true that he was going to cap his want of natural affection and stinginess, and other shortcomings, by making himself the laughing-stock of Venice? If so, in view of the fact that he probably would soon be the father of six children, had he made any arrangement for him, Luigi, in the future?

To this the old man replied with his old spirit and sense of humour:

"MY DEAR SON,—Thank you for your kind remembrance of my approaching marriage. I hope that Venice is grateful for the amusement I have provided for it. With regard to your future, you may be happy to know that I have made you guardian to the six children."

The way Luigi spoke of his father and



Donna Lisa horrified Venice; and Vremi, in whom he confided, began to feel as if he owed it to his friend to pay out the old man for his blatant absurdity. To Luigi and Vremi it seemed as if Della Braccia had taken this step on purpose to annoy Luigi.

And there was one other who did not approve of the marriage, and that was old Giuseppe.

"Questa Coda non ê di quello gatto," he told Viola, with a vague perception of the meaning of the saying, and convinced that it was necessary to use one in the hour of crisis. "At eighteen to marry an old man with one foot in the grave—why, I might as well ask Beatrice to marry me!" Beatrice was the gondolier's daughter, who was fifteen, and who came to fetch the washing.

"Ah, Santissima lanternone, and you with three children and a wife!" Viola was very much in favour of the match, seeing that she was going to be taken as maid, with increased wages, and the prospect of the Nobilissima's discarded wardrobe.

"Ah, you women, you think nothing of love!" Giuseppe said to her; "any man who can find you beautiful dresses can have you."

And Viola, with Venetian subtlety, had replied with a toss of her head:

"Are we not right? Any man can love-that

costs nothing, less than eating a breakfast—but it is not every man who has the intelligence to be able to keep a wife."

After that remark Giuseppe was silent, for he knew it was a slap at himself, for it was well known that he couldn't afford to keep his wife, who went out and cooked at dinnerparties. But all the same it was cruel of Viola, for it was his devotion to the Di Val Moreno family which had kept him working for low wages so many years.

### CHAPTER VIII

AND on her wedding morning Donna Lisa awoke early in her father's villa at Le Cadore. She had not seen much of the old Count since their arrival the week before. which was partly because he was very busy, and partly because he wished it so. He must not weary her with his presence, he thought. Afterwards she would have enough of him. He was making the villa beautiful for his bride; paper-hangers and builders, there had been an array of these for weeks past, and this morning everything was in good shape. All the villas round were full of guests, and others would arrive from different places in time for the wedding. This morning, too, was bright and full of sunshine, as Viola said, she had prayed the Madonna that it should In a large, darkened, empty room lay the wedding dress, and the veil of old Venetian lace, which her mother had worn. stairs, locked up, were her jewels. The presents

had been magnificent—far more magnificent because she was marrying Della Braccia than they would have been otherwise, for beside his they knew, the donors, that insignificant gifts would pale. In the stable was a pair of horses, and in the coach-house two new carriages and an automobile.

"That is the way you are going to kill me, eh?" the old man had said to her when it arrived, the gift of an old rich cousin who lived in Rome.

Although he had never been in one, he had every intention of accompanying his young wife if she elected to use it.

"As well that death as any other," he had said the other day to his attorney. He had no illusions about his longevity—his people were long-lived; but he was past seventy. Ten, fifteen years—how fast they fly! how much faster they would fly now with this young thing in the house! Last night Lisa had been pensive, and she was pensive still this morning when she woke. Last night she had been sad, thinking that this was her last night beneath her father's roof, and this morning she was full of suppressed excitement, at the thought of her journey to Paris that day. She did not think much of him, her old husband; there was no novelty about him. She had

known him all her life; but the new life—that fascinated her. To travel as a married woman, to see Paris, the city she had longed to visit, to go everywhere—perhaps to be admired; and—yes, she thought it would be interesting to the public to see such a young girl married to so old a man, taking care of him. It would be like a novel, for she would be so good to him. But on this, her wedding morning, she gave no thought to passion or love. She was not even aware of their absence. There was content, and that seemed enough.

It was not much later than seven o'clock when she stepped out into the garden for the last time a girl. She was looking forward to to-day, as she had looked forward to picnics, to days of festa, to treats of different kinds as a child, a little as she had looked forward to her confirmation day, to wedding days of her friends, to all the unusual happenings, which, while they had been fewer in her life than in that of many girls, had yet been many. The morning, how exquisite it was! each leaf and shrub seeming to drip perfume with the dewa distillery of nature working silently in short breaths of sweetness, everything beginning to array itself in smart garments, and with here and there the bud of a rose peeping out from

its setting of crystal diamond as if to ask her: "What is happening to-day?"

And sunlight over yonder hills, and sunlight on the lawns; already the sun was high in the heavens, it seemed to her. Far away in the offices, she could hear the first opening and shutting of doors, the commencement of activity amongst the servants.

In another hour every one would be awake; there would be a huge stir in the house—ringing of bells, scurrying hither and thither of servants, calling from this one to the other, messengers coming and going, laughter and talk, telegrams and belated parcels, the clatter of crockery, the chink-chink of silver and porcelain, cries from her girl friends, gruff merriment from the men, her mother tearful and excited, her father solemnly solicitous, carriages driving up to the door, and Viola tremulously elated, dressing her for the wedding.

She seemed to realise all that would begin in another hour, as she looked on the waking flowers, which, without moving, yet seemed to be shaking the dewdrops off, as if they were sponging their faces and flicking the transparent drops of water from their leaf fingertips into the humans' faces in sheer frolic. And because she knew how breathlessly busy it

would all be in an hour, she seemed to want to hold it back, to keep the silence around her for a moment, as if she gathered a veil of gauze about her, and held it there, close to her face. Then she stepped out on to the terraces and wandered away, far, far down the garden where they could not find her, where she could be still alone, away from it all.

Last night for the first time she had felt a little weary of preparations; they had become so multifold—realised for a few brief seconds that everything stirring was coming to an end, that now life in real earnest was going to begin on totally different lines.

And she had wandered down to the lake, then gone round it and into the wood, and then, with no premeditation, without knowing why, further still to where an iron fence divided her father's property from the Norinis'.

Here how often she had come as a child and called Leonardo over the fence, when he was walking in the garden with his tutor—a solemn priest, who walked up and down reading his breviary, while Leonardo played, stopping now and then to admonish him or to remind him that it was time to go in and study.

The woods, how cool and mysterious they



were! It was almost the first time that she had been alone in them, for always, ever since the governess had gone, she had been compelled to take a maid with her. She had not been alone in them since she ran away once, as a child, to call Leonardo, and was punished.

The dark graceful aisles with their pointed vaults—it seemed as if she had never noticed them before; nor the interlacing above, like green-brown trellises, showing little bits of blue, like turquoise mosaic, where one caught glimpses of the sky above, and here and there the sun making little squares of gold-emerald on the dark luscious moss. Never had the forest seemed to her as it seemed this morning; never had she tried to breathe into her lungs the aromatic poignant perfume of the pine needles.

"Ah!" she sighed; and as she sighed it seemed to her as if a revelation had been made to her of what nature might mean. For nature has a great deal more to do with us than we think.

We do not know how it is working all the time, and always, for us — never against us. When humanity deserts us, nature never does; instead, she spreads forth a consolation we do not appreciate; and green is not only the colour

of hope, it is the colour of comprehension, the colour of the soul's balm.

Sometimes we realise her as if she were a new acquaintance, suddenly introduced; sometimes we grow to know her quietly, gradually, as she insinuates herself into our very life, and becomes inexpressibly dear. With some, she never reveals herself; but that is very rare, for even when we do not know it. she is whispering to us. Prisoners of fate, of circumstance, chained by convention, by accident or by want of enterprise, do not know that in heart and soul they have become vagabonds, thanks to nature: that while they are behind walls in body, nature has taken their spirit for walks abroad-walks and talks uttered in sighs and tender murmurings, and the fancy of music which is like sound.

"How beautiful, how beautiful!" she whispered to herself. It was the first time that she had appreciated this wood, yet she had often said "how beautiful" before. The height, the depth, the cool darkness, were widening her thoughts, and gave her perceptions of freedom — perceptions which seemed choked as she remembered that she must go back, go back to be dressed, go back to be married.

For a few seconds she stood there in the

pathway alone, and listened to the sounds of the wood: to the falling of pine needles, to the scrunching of fir cones by a squirrel, to the call of one bird to the other. She did not know that subconsciously almost, she was going through a trance, a trance which was accompanied by the mirage liberty, which is at once the inspiration and the delusion of each soul in turn. She did not even know that it was warning her.

She heard the click of a gate and started. "Lisa!"

Under the forest spell it seemed to her that some bird whispered her name. Then her eyes met those of Leonardo, and she read something in them whose existence she had never suspected anywhere, not even when she

had read about it.
"Leonardo!"

She held out her hand, and he took it and held it.

This, too, seemed part of the forest, of her new understanding with nature, that he should have stepped out of a sun ray, as it were, to speak to her, that he should hold her hand and she not draw it away. And because a new chrism had taken hold of her mind, suddenly she remembered the child life—the child life which had abruptly come to an end



two years ago, only to go on again in little spurts when she was at Le Cadore, or when he occasionally called at the Palazzo in Venice—arose insistent like a photograph that was taken some time back, and which yet faithfully reproduces the scenes, the scenery that have been forgotten. How real it seemed suddenly that child life, when they had played games here in the woods, and her governess sat and did crochet beneath a tree, while the priest walked up and down just inside the fence, so as not to have to talk to the governess.

If he had known her character better. Leonardo would perhaps not have uttered the words he did. He had known her well as a child, and admired her character then: she had always been honourable in games, honourable and plucky and generous and unselfish; but he could not tell that the characteristics had strengthened with age, that she was a woman with character, so far as character can develop in such surroundings as hers. The Latin races are not so prone to develop strength as the Saxon and the Germanic, and the education of the Latins is rotten to the core. Lisa had, as an only child, had even less opportunities than other children to try the stuff she was made of, on other temperaments. She had been hot-housed

# 50K

### AN OLD MAN'S DARLING 12

and pruned, watered and tilled, by the exclusive, narrow education of an Italian girl of good family; only she had not imbibed the little deceits and love of intrigue which are so often the outcome of it. Their poverty had made her a more useful personage than she otherwise would have been. It had necessitated occupations, attention to household cares, while the absence of a chaperon had kept her always beneath her mother's eve vet infused a little more independence into her life. He did not know about Savielli and the Giotto. Had he been asked to express a candid opinion, judging from the few women he had met, he would have said that no woman was capable of keeping a promise, except, perhaps, one to her own advantage, or of considering it as sacred. What he did not know was that just what pleased him in her, was a certain similarity of character to his own, an instinctive uprightness and purity which rose above surroundings, above the narrow education, above the superstitions of their priest-ridden beliefs, above the petty gossip and scandal which were always being discussed around them: that they both possessed in common something of an impersonal quality of the heart, which had nothing to do with time or place or race or nation, or

upbringing—a spark of the same flame of the divine, which cares not where it catches fire, nor where it sheds its light, but which always burns steadily upwards.

Had he known that for nothing on earth would she have broken her promise made to the old man: had he known that she was ignorant of the fact that she did not love him as a wife ought to love her husband; had he realised that she did not even know the symptoms of love; had he thought it possible that while she did not love him passionately, she yet cared for the old Count with all her heart, and with an added feeling of pity which was very nearly akin to love, like that of a mother for a crippled child, whose deformity she hates to look upon, the while she tells herself that he is not really very deformed, that his eyes are beautiful. he known that she was far, far younger in mind than he imagined, and that the idea of marrying him had never occurred to her. Had he known and realised all this, he would have been silent, known that it was kinder to be silent, because to tell her of his love was of no avail except to distress her, since for nothing on earth would she have pained the old Count now, at the eleventh hour; he would have let her go and followed her with

a holy love like that for a saint, at the idea of her magnificent sacrifice.

Instead he only thought of the pain at his own heart, of the perfidy of fate, of the misunderstanding which had kept them apart, because he had not yet had the courage to tell her of his love, and with a description of scorn at her greed for wealth.

This morning he had risen with a terrible load at his heart. It was her wedding morning, and he felt that he would never have the courage to be present at the ceremony, while on the other hand he dreaded the comments which would be made by his family on his He had awakened early from a absence. restless night and wandered forth hardly knowing why, unless it was to go and look upon the house in which she was sleeping, on this the last morning on which she was free. After this, how would it be when they met; would he learn to forget? would she be happy in her new life? how long would the old man last, and when he died would her thoughts return to him, the boy companion of her childhood? Wild fancies rushed through his brain once, and again, only to be dismissed as absurd-plans which were impossible of execution, boylike, yet very earnest, to be discarded as saner thought asserted



mastery. He had fancied that even now he would take her away—carry her off, drag her from the very altar steps, or dare the old man to a duel beneath the very walls of the cathedral.

Instead, she stood before him, the sweet, fragrant, fresh embodiment of his thoughts and dreams and wonder.

- "Why did you not answer my letter?" he asked her.
  - "Your letter?"
- "I wrote you to drop your handkerchief in the canal. I wanted to speak to you."
  - "You wrote that letter—you?"

There was a world of meaning in the way she said "you." There was surprise, but there was also the question: "Is it possible that you love me?"

"Yes; I wanted to see you, to tell you—ah, Lisa, you know that I love you!"

His words, his voice, his look thrilled her. How different was this, to the way Della Braccia spoke, and coming from the lips of youth how sonorous, how musical, how sweet they sounded! Instinctively she withdrew her hand.

"Had I known!" were the words on her lips. Then she remembered.

No, even if she had known, it would have



been impossible. The promise was given; and he, the old man—she would not have broken his heart, made him ridiculous; besides, Leonardo—she had never thought of him like that. Or had she?

Now it seemed to her that she had been constantly thinking of him, that it was his face, his smile, the expression in his eyes—such good, true eyes—that had always been those of the prince in the long silk tights, and the waving feather.

"But I am to be married to-day."

"Yes, I know, but you must not. Ah, I will make money for you presently—you must not sell yourself."

"Sell myself!" Lisa's face flushed, then turned a ghastly white. Sell herself—was that what people were saying, what they thought? How horrible! Was it likely that her father and her mother would join in the selling of her? That the Cardinal himself would have told her that she was doing right? For one instant she felt an impulse to give this marriage up, to go back and tell the old Count that she had changed her mind. He would forgive her. Then she remembered her promises: how often he had offered to release her, how often she had insisted; and the Giotto, all he had done for her. A look of anger shot



through her eyes. Even if she did not marry the old Count, how could she ever marry or think of a man who thought this of her, his old playmate? Ah, the Norinis were not noble, or they could not have thoughts like this!

"There is still time," he pleaded; "let me save you, you of all women in the world. How can you live without love? Oh, Lisa, I adore you!"

The anger died down in her eyes, and she grew rigid. For one moment it seemed as if the world had tipped upside down, as if she were seized with vertigo, and saw chasms swooping open in front of her. The sunlight seemed to be blinding her through the trees, and the trees to be dancing.

"You cannot live without love," he had said, and she had thought to have clutched love. By what right did he speak to her like this, who till a few days ago had never spoken of love? Gradually the sense of numbness vanished.

"You do not understand," she said. "I am devoted to the Count della Braccia, and he to me!"

Then she swept away along the forest road, raising her skirts with one hand. And his eyes followed her up the pathway, leaving



him dazed, with an indefinable impression fixed on his memory, struck there as if with a hot iron—the impression of Donna Lisa walking away from him proud, angry, and declaring her love for the old man.

"Ha!"

Donna Lisa was at the boundary of the forest when he recalled his scattered senses, and she heard a scoffing, bitter laugh echo through the woodland as she crossed the dividing glade which took her back into her father's garden—back to reality.



### CHAPTER IX

And after all, during the first month of their married life, things went more smoothly between Della Braccia and his wife than any one had ever expected. The trip to Paris had realised all her expectations, and the old Count was fully able, from a past of oftrepeated experience, to make her enjoy it to its full. They had made expeditions to places outside Paris, and seen everything worth seeing within its walls without the least fatigue.

"Every one makes a burden of pleasure," he had told her, "and sight-seeing is like study: one ought to sandwich it in between a good deal of rest and excellent meals." They had gone to the theatre and opera, and he had taken her to Paillard and to one or two more risque resorts because they had amused him as a youth; and, watching her disposition as he did, with the dual desire to anticipate weariness of him, and that of discovering clues to inner recesses of her mind to which he had not yet penetrated, he was



rejoiced to find that her mind was singularly clean and pure. She knew nothing of the dark side of life in Paris, the side which takes and pays, and asks no questions. Like all old roues there was nothing which charmed him so much as simplicity and purity, and she was singularly pure and simple. From Paris they went on to Switzerland, moving slowly towards home. She had enjoyed herself immensely, the novelty leaving her but little time for reflection. Yet he was aware of an inward restlessness—a restlessness which might not have been hers if Leonardo had not met her on her wedding morning. Yet it was not love that she felt for Leonardo, rather a resentment that he should have, as the Marchesa called it, "put ideas into her head."

She had been singularly quiet while Viola dressed her, so quiet, so pale that Viola had looked at her anxiously once or twice, and confided afterwards to her fellow-servants that she looked like a dead person, and that she believed she did not care for the *vecchio*, that she was only marrying him for his money; and that it was to be hoped that he would soon die, so that she could marry some one she loved.

During the ceremony she had felt as if she moved in a dream, while the words, "You must not sell yourself," sounded so close to her



ears, that it seemed as if Leonardo was there by her side uttering them.

Everywhere they had taken Lisa for the old Count's daughter, and he took it very goodnaturedly.

"Do I, then, really look so old?" he had asked her once, smiling, but with a touch of wistfulness in his voice; and she had comforted him, and told him that he was so handsome that it didn't matter how old he looked. She managed him wonderfully, treating him like a child almost, yet without spoiling him—firmly at times, when she wanted her own way. He never was cross with her, but when the gout seized him he grew very irritable with the servants, with his doctor, with every one who approached him. Once she had come into the room when he was swearing, and he had stopped immediately.

But she had laughed.

"Go on, go on, if it does you good; box my ears, and throw everything about the room," she had said, "you will feel better," and he had laughed, and the evil mood been dispelled. And it was pathetic to see what care he took of her, his solicitude for her health, for her amusement, often going out when he was weary, staying up late, and rising early to keep pace with her vivacity and youth. It was Viola



who first told her respectfully, but in the familiar way in which Italian servants speak to their employers:

"If you go on like that you will kill him. He is no boy, the Signor Conte, remember, to run about day and night."

Yes, Viola was right, she must be more considerate; only she found that when they did not go out a strange lassitude overtook her, a feeling not so much of boredom as of strain. He never left her hardly, and she longed to be alone, to have a moment to think. At last she persuaded him to take a siesta every afternoon. At first he had protested. do I want with a siesta every afternoon?" he had asked her. Finally he had consented if she would bring her book or work or letters, and sit beside him. Once or twice, when he had awakened, he had found her eyes fixed on him as if she had been examining his features, watching his sleep—the sleep of the old, which is so like that of death.

Once or twice she had suggested that she should go out, while he laid down; but this he always objected to.

"Wait, carissima, wait; in an hour I shall feel quite fresh again, and then we will go out together."

During the first few days she had agreed to

this, and sat and chafed in the half-darkened room, all her youthful vitality seeming to beat against prison bars. Once or twice she had risen and paced the room, saying to herself: "I can't bear it"; yet later she appeared smiling and beautiful, and exquisitely dressed at dinner. Then at last, one day she had spoken to him frankly as she had done about the Giotto. She had told him that she must have an hour or two in the day to herself; and he had wondered if the note of weariness, of disillusion, had entered—if the moment he had dreaded had arrived, the while another dread had come to him he would not utter: for what reason did she want to get away?

There was no doubt at all that the Count della Braccia was very jealous. She had noticed it already, and she shuddered when she thought of it. He grew fidgety even when she paused a moment on the top of the steps of the hotel to look at the passing crowd. He grew agitated if any one turned to look after her on the street, and he made her so nervous that she had grown to have a conscious expression when any one did speak to her, or even look her way. Once he had almost insulted a man who had offered her a seat in a public garden. Once or twice she had spoken to him about it.



"Caro, what do you imagine they can do to me? You must not be like that; you make yourself unhappy, you make me unhappy. Since I belong to you now, what can it matter if they look at me?"

And he begged her to forgive him.

"I know I am an old fool, but if you only knew how angry it makes me. You see, I am so afraid that you will one day take a fancy to some one else."

And she had answered very gravely:

"To think that is an insult to me." After that he tried to behave better, and she at last obtained her wish, that they should dine in the public dining-room.

"You are dull alone with me," he said, when she begged that they should do this; and she had told him very sweetly that she enjoyed seeing the crowds, the dresses, hearing the talk and laughter, and yes—she told him: "I like hearing them say how pretty I am."

"And don't I tell you that every minute?"

"Yes, dear; but I think you have gone insane on the subject, and have only one idea, so it no longer counts." Then she would add, with the swift diplomacy which was becoming second habit: "After all, if everybody did as we did, and dined upstairs, there would be no need for these large dining-rooms



in hotels, so it shows that a good many people feel as I do."

But, on the whole, they were very happy, and life after they returned to Italy settled down into a more comfortable groove. had been May when they left; it was August when they returned, and they would not go to Venice till November. Then Lisa was to make her first appearance in society as a married woman, as the hostess of the Palazzo Braccia. She hoped that they would entertain and have a brilliant season; and the old Count did not tell her how much he dreaded her meeting young men and being admired: how most of all he dreaded her meeting Ugolino Vremi, whom he was sure was the man who had written that letter, for amongst the few things she withheld from him was the knowledge of the writer, the events of her wedding morning. That was her secret—would always be, she told herself with the wisdom which, while it had always lain hidden in her clever brain, now with daily intercourse with the old man was becoming more developed, more subtle. To tell him would be to tell him of the conversation, to tell him that Norini had accused her of selling herself. She would die of shame if he. Della Braccia, her husband, ever had such an idea.



It was good to be at home again, good to have her lovely villa to look after, and her dogs and horses, and to take long drives in the campagna, and to see her friends. She told herself that she was very happy, unconscious that the fact that she told herself this constantly, proved that something was missing, for when one is really happy one does not know it, as one does not complain when terrible grief dazes, overwhelms us.

What she knew least of all was that she was haunted day and night, by the fear lest she should meet Leonardo.

But the summer came and went without her seeing him, for he had gone away to study medicine at Vienna a few days before her return, but she heard about him from the young Contessa Manodestra, the only married daughter of the Principessa Forli, who came, as all smart Venice comes, to Le Cadore for the summer, and who had struck up a great friendship with the young Countess della Braccia. If only those who care for us or take an interest in us would realise that it is always better to be sincere with us, or to tell us all that they know or hear. As long as the world exists, so long will we always in the end hear what we were not intended to hear, and probably in a cruel, distorted



way, which might have been spared us if the beloved had told us, the friend. It was no good for the old Count to run after Donna Lisa all day, to keep her, as it were, in a gilded cage, through the bars of which he pushed delicate morsels and luxuries. It is no good ever to hide good news or bad criticisms, or admiration. It all comes round as the world turns, and we could avoid for ourselves and for others incalculable annoyance and harm; if we would only realise this it would simplify life so enormously.

And so it was with the old Count. He kept all men away, so far as he could, staying in the room when they called, so that the visit was so stilted and uninteresting that they never came again; or begging Donna Lisa not to see this one or that, the while he encouraged her friendship with the Contessa Manodestra, who had married a consummate bore, thinking that she would compare notes favourably, and because she was a woman who would help her to wile away her time, without being dangerous; and just from the lips of that lady she heard all that the Count would rather she had not heard, which sometimes she told herself, she had wished had not been told her.

"Oh yes, I know all about it," the Contessa told her one day, partly carelessly, partly

maliciously, because she was jealous of Donna Lisa's wealth, and a little, perhaps, of her content. "He told me everything one day: how he had always adored you, always thought that one day he would make a great name and fortune, and then ask you to marry him. Now he is broken-hearted; he says he has nothing to live for."

"Oh, nonsense!" The Countess della Braccia drew herself up; she despised such talk as this. "There never was anything between us," she said stiffly; "I never thought of him."

"Yes, he is good-looking." The Contessa Manodestra spoke musingly. She, like every one else, wanted to know how it really was between the young wife and the old husband. No one believed for a moment that she cared for him.

"And I suppose he told you that I sold myself for money!" Donna Lisa burst out one day.

"Oh, cara mia!"

The Contessa was much too well bred to concede that he had said this, but while he had not said so, he had hinted at the fact; that is to say, he had said with boyish despair:

"Tell me, Contessa, does she love him, or

did she only marry him for his money—to help her parents, perhaps?"

And another time Donna Lisa said:

"Please, Contessa, if any one ever asks you, tell them that I am devoted to my husband, that I am perfectly happy;" and the Contessa had promised to do so, giving a little laugh, which had left the impression that while she did not believe her, she quite agreed with Donna Lisa that it was the best thing to say.

To her friends she said:

"The Contessina protests so much that she is happy, that one knows she must be miserable." But she was not miserable, only she thought a good deal lately about Leonardo: whether it was true that he was so unhappy, whether she could have done otherwise. And once or twice lately she asked herself whether she had indeed sold herself. And as she saw a few friends, and heard them talk and discuss their married life with the freedom which is now customary between women, she awakened to a great many perceptions. In fact, the Contessa Manodestra was hardly the best companion she could have had, for she disliked her husband, and had a lover whom she disappeared occasionally to meet. Under the promise of secrecy, she confided all about him to Lisa, who was so shocked that for



many months she did not go back to see her.

Yet the thought of Leonardo brought something different into her life to what had been there. The girlishness seemed to be disappearing, and to be replaced by a dignity which at first had seemed like the pose of a child trying to be grown up, but had gradually become second nature and suited her. had an extraordinary repose of manner, a repose which a little bit conveyed the idea that she was cold-cold, or at least undemonstrative-a little callous, perhaps, or was it resigned? Even the old Count could see that she was changed, and often he pondered over it. wondering if she were happy, or if she chafed and would not show it. Now and then he felt tempted to let her launch herself on a sea of amusement. He wanted to see how it suited her; above all, he wanted her not to be bored, yet always he returned to the same thought. With her beauty, with her charm enhanced a hundred-fold by the beautiful clothes she was now able to indulge in, and which she took a delight in, from sheer want of interests, earning at last the reputation of being vain, was it possible that she was In the years to come she told satisfied? herself, though never others, that it was her

clothes that had kept her alive. And he delighted in advising her. He would go with her to her dressmaker and point out costumes in pictures, which, a little altered to meet modern fashion, would suit her to perfection. He ordered stuffs from Paris, from London, from Vienna, furs direct from Russia. It was an empty enough life that she led, and yet time passed, passed often pleasantly, for he was a well-read man, and selected all sorts of literature which amused and instructed her. Often she read to him; sometimes—rarely he read to her, but his eyes soon grew tired. Now and then they sat out in the garden discussing what they had read, or he would tell her stories of Venice when he was young, or such of his adventures as he did not mind her knowing, and almost always he amused her. Then people would drop in to luncheon, tea, or dinner.

It would have been an ideal life for a woman of forty: for a girl full of youthful aspirations and vitality, who had never had her fling, not even in the way of balls and dances, it was, to say the least, unnaturally calm; and now and then the feeling of restraint, the sameness made her almost hysterical.

She was like a rose tree which is confined in too small a space, and which feels the desire



to spread and stretch its branches, to diffuse its perfume in wider compass. Her life was always like hushed music, to hear which the ear strains to listen, expecting constantly the swelling fullness of the melody which never comes. And underlying everything always, there was the restlessness of an undefined hope, the anticipation of something which must not come, which she must not wish for, and yet which insisted—insisted, urged, goaded into thought.

How long was this going to last, how long could she bear it? When she had been married six months she began to ask herself this, then to take herself to task about it; and of late she hated the fact that what interested her most was when he spoke of a possible future for her, in which he had no part. Lately she had grown to ask herself what the dual feeling was which possessed her, the dread lest he should die, the awful dread of remaining alone in life without him, without his care, and yet the desire unshaped, unpermitted to dwell, for his death, for release. Yet in saner moments, moments when she was not mentally weary with a weariness which was like physical lassitude, she told herself that she would never, never meet with such love and tenderness again, never; and she still held back the thought from herself, the certainty, that what she asked



was not only to be loved—it seemed to her that everybody loved her—but to *love*, even if loving brought pain—yes, with all its cruelty, perhaps with its brutality, with its disillusion, with its ephemeral fleeting vibration, and its short-lived triumph, what she needed in life and dared not even express, the while gradually she learned that what was missing from her life, was the zest and piquancy and fever of passion.



#### CHAPTER X

Venice society was more inquisitive even than it pretended to be, and it did not disguise its interest as to the arrival of the Della Braccias and what position they were going to take up. With a young and beautiful woman like Donna Lisa, and with his wealth, with the magnificence of the Palazzo Braccia, which was counted one of the most splendid in Venice, and shown to tourists when the family was away, it was quite possible that they would become a new inspirational centre for the *illuminati*.

So it is with the smart world. The house which last season was the one for which invitations were the most coveted, where the music and the flowers, the merriment and the gorgeousness were the most talked of, is closed this. Sickness or death, poverty or travel, or may be scandal, have flapped their wings beneath its eaves, and to-day it is closed and melancholy, with the blinds drawn and the balconies silent, like one who has had lovely eyes and gone blind. Then after generations, perhaps, it is thrown open again: the grandson, the nephew



the married daughter are in possession; the ball has turned round, and once more doors are thrown open, servants come and go, and lights twinkle and glow in the windows. So it was with the Palazzo Braccia. After his first wife's death, and especially lately, since his son's marriage, the old Count had almost deserted it, letting it to strangers for an enormous rental to keep it warmed, or closing it and living in his appartement at the Grand Hotel.

But this year all through October, there were signs of activity: the windows were open, carpets hung on the balcony, workmen were heard hammering, till at last baskets of flowers suspended to the balconies proclaimed that the much-talked-of bride had actually arrived.

No one but Lisa herself, knew what a welcome relief it was to come to town again. She loved the country, and she was still as tenderly fond of her old husband as ever, but she had grown inexpressibly weary of the sameness of her life, of the tedium of always suiting her conversation to that of one so much older than herself; above all, she was weary of his constant espionage. If she remained out driving a little later than usual enjoying the cool evening, on the rare occasions when he was not with her, he would meet her at the door, and ask her a hundred questions.



"Who have you seen? Did you meet any one? Did you stop anywhere?"

At first she had met his suspicions with laughter. She would answer:

"I met a young man and I took him for a long drive, and before we got down he took my hand in his and kissed it, and we are going to meet to-morrow down there at the gate."

When she talked like that he would become a little ashamed.

"Ah, carina, I know that I am a fool, but if you knew—it seems so extraordinary that you should love me."

But lately she had shown a little more inclination to kick over the traces.

"Are you not afraid of killing my love," she had said to him once, "by your jealousy and suspicion?"

Yes, he was afraid of killing it, afraid of pushing his methods too far, yet for nothing on earth could he alter them: he could not bear to see her talking to any man, he could not bear her to be absent for long from him; and when she resented all this, he imagined that she was tired of him, or that she was interested in some one else.

Sometimes he discussed it with her.

"You see, bellezza, it is also this. If you were to care for some one else and I were to

į



die, I know that you would feel miserable all your life. A woman who has been unfaithful does not feel it perhaps at first: she does not feel it while her husband is alive, yet one day she is full of remorse, and when I am dead and gone, I do not want you to have any remorse. I want you to be able to say: 'Poverino, I saw him into the grave, and I was good to him; now that he is gone I have nothing to reproach myself with. I can be happy.'"

When he spoke like that her heart melted.

"But, caro, can you not see that you put ideas into my head by all this talk of another man all day long? But when do I see another man to speak to him?"

And once he had startled her by saying:

"That letter that was written to you the day of the contract—have you any idea of whom it came from?"

"Some goose," she answered laughing, and with averted eyes. She did not want to tell him an untruth, but also it would never do to let him know. She was growing wiser as time went on.

And when they came to Venice, she began wondering how she could get over this mania of his, whether she could ever vanquish it. Here, in Venice, it would be intolerable if he was going to be like that. She knew that all the



men in Venice of their world would call, and it would be dreadful if he was always going to be jealous, and he would make her look ridiculous if he always sat in the room when she received.

But to no one, not even to her mother, did she ever breathe a word of this. It would have seemed to her not only treachery, but to suggest that there was some reason; or if no reason, at least a possibility of her forming interests apart from him.

And she was pleasantly surprised when in answer to her suggestion that she would like to give a dance at the Palazzo, he agreed without a shadow of annoyance. It was so unlike him that she began to hope that here in Venice he was going to try and overcome his little foible, which was so little, she told herself, in comparison with his infinite care and tenderness.

"Yes, it is a good idea; we will give a ball such as hasn't been seen in Venice for years," he said; and she went over to his chair and put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"How good you are, how good you are to me!" she murmured.

She was not aware that when she said this, it was not only to reassure him, it was to



reassure herself, to remind herself of all she owed him.

But the old Count was not doing it entirely for her. He wanted to find out who was the man who had written the letter, and he had a firm conviction that it was Ugolino Vremi.

What good it would do him to know it, that he had not considered. And what comforted him in the idea of a ball, was that as hostess she would not be able to attend particularly to one more than another, while he would have an opportunity of seeing if Vremi was still as taken with her as he had seemed before her marriage.

But already Venice was beginning to talk of his jealousy.

"Have you noticed that he never leaves her side, that he watches her all the time she dances; that if she is sitting on a balcony, or in another room he looks about anxiously?"

Yes, it was true; and the feeling that every one must notice it spoiled a great deal of her pleasure.

After the first few parties they had attended together, she would say to him as they alighted from the gondola or went upstairs:

"Now, per carita, çaro, don't follow me



about as if I were a child. It looks so odd, and people notice it."

And he would promise not to, the while because she said this, he imagined that she had some reason.

All the invitations had been issued, and there were only two days now before the ball was to take place when Lisa, crossing the large hall to enter her gondola, became aware that the big doors were open and that the servant was talking to a visitor. As she approached, the stranger took off his hat and introduced himself as the Count Luigi della Braccia, her stepson.

A blush rose to Lisa's cheeks. Her husband was lying down, and she had intended to go and see her mother, one of the few visits on which he did not always accompany her. She had never seen Luigi, but her husband had spoken to her about him, and she feared much, that if he found him, there would be a scene. Once or twice she had tried to persuade the old Count to make it up, but always without avail.

"Will you allow me to detain you for a few moments?"

Lisa hesitated. She had no grudge against this young man, and she always hated to be discourteous, yet, if her husband was angry!

"Is it . . . Could you . . ." She smiled. "I really don't know what I ought to do," she said frankly.

"Follow your own heart, madame, you will not go far wrong," he replied gallantly; and she noticed that when he smiled he was as good-looking as his father, but with a sinister expression in his eyes, and the weary, jaded look of a man who has lived a dissipated life.

"He looks in a sense older than his father," she said to herself.

She didn't like his face, and she had heard atrocious things about him from his father, yet the right feeling which generally prompted her, made her dislike the idea of turning him away from his father's house.

"I was just going out," she said hesitatingly.

"I will not detain you many moments."

And in a few instants he had told her the object of his visit. He wanted a reconciliation, and he wanted an invitation for his wife to the ball. He spoke with some feeling of his father.

"People have come between us," he said, "and his attitude towards us does us untold harm. He is an old man now, and this feud ought to come to an end. You, I feel sure, can do anything with him; he will listen

to you. May I hope that you will try and exercise what influence you have on our behalf?"

"I will do what I can." She spoke with some dignity, remembering how this son had behaved towards the dear old man; "but you must excuse my saying that he has much to forgive."

He gave a little scoffing laugh.

"It is natural that you should say so: you have only heard his side of the story—there are two sides. He made my mother miserable with jealousy—he broke her heart. I, too, have something to forgive, yet if you say that I am wrong, it must be so." He added: "I will ask his forgiveness."

But it was not such an easy matter to persuade the old Count to forgive his son.

"He does not want my forgiveness," he told her; "he merely wants to be recognised by us on account of his wife. It does them harm, this feud; and probably he wants to borrow more money, and if the money-lenders know that we speak again they will count on me to pay—no, it is better as it is."

Later in the evening he said:

"He had no business to ask you—he does not know you; he insulted us both at the time of our marriage."

And Lisa put her two arms round his neck behind his chair.

"Don't you think that perhaps he was not so stupid in coming to ask me? Perhaps he thought, 'That is the one my father loves best in the world, he will not refuse her.'"

When she spoke like that Della Braccia never refused her anything.

"Ah, if you asked for the moon, somehow, it seems to me, I should have to go and fetch it. Yes, Luigi is not such a fool after all; but do you want me to have him here?"

"What do I care? I do not know him, except from what you have told me, which certainly is hardly a recommendation, yet I think a father and son—it certainly is dreadful."

She had thought much throughout the day of what Luigi had said about his own mother and Della Braccia's jealousy; from her own experience she could well imagine that his mother might have suffered.

"You do not know how repugnant it is to me," he said, getting up from the table and walking into the next room.

And as Lisa followed him he told her one thing after the other.

"Well, caro, you must do as you think; but we are told to forgive our enemies, and when it comes to a son . . ."



After that she did not worry him any more, but just because she had asked him he allowed an invitation to be sent them.

"But I do not want them constantly here," he said.

Even of his own son he was jealous, and then a long experience of the young man's character had made him mistrust his sincerity; he had something up his sleeve, or he would never have approached Donna Lisa.

"One must be careful with that young man," he told her; "I do not trust him a yard."

And in the days to come Lisa was bound to own that he had been right; aye, more, over and over again she cursed the day when she had persuaded his father to forgive him. How often deeds we have thought right turn again and rend us!

In Venice the ball at the Casa Braccia had been pronounced the greatest success that had been known for years. Every one was there who belonged to the smart world, and every one was dressed in their best, perhaps because even then the women knew that they would be eclipsed by the dress of the Countess Della Braccia, for where there is absolutely no limit to the price paid for a gown or jewels, there certainly must be

something wrong if the dress does not make its mark.

Never had Donna Lisa looked so magnificent as to-night. Her dress had been ordered from Paris, and had cost thousands of francs. It would have been hard to say of what colour it was; sometimes it looked grey as night clouds, sometimes beneath the light it shot a pale tint of mauve or sapphire blue or silver, giving the impression of a rainbow set in the vault of the heavens at night, while sequins glittered here and there—not in profusion, but hidden away in unexpected corners, gleaming suddenly like fireflies, trying to vie with the chain of brilliants and the exquisite jewels in her hair and in the corsage of her dress.

It had been the old man's idea.

"It must be a dress that looks as if it had been spun at Murano: a dress of a sea siren expressing the soul of Venice."

And it had something about it which reminded one of the waters of the canal, now blue, now grey, now reflecting the purple of sunset, or the shimmering stars. During the evening every eye turned to her again and again. Men who had known her as a girl wondered why they had never seen how beautiful she was; strangers, "foreigners of



distinction," as the newspapers called them, who had been invited through introductions from people they knew, held their breath. It was a poem to see her cross the room, and the fact that she belonged to the old man added piquancy and interest to her presentment.

"Some one will have a prize when the old

chap drops off," said one.

"The gods certainly do love a joke," said another, "to give a woman like that to an old codger who ought to be lying in his grave or at least in his bed at this hour."

While the frivolous and the ribald whispered to each other that it would not be long before the old man realised that it was not all roses to marry a beautiful girl.

"If he is made a fool of, he deserves it," said one.

"He is dreadfully jealous, they say," said another.

While the women all whispered with accents of doubt:

"And, you know, they say that she is devoted to him."

"Or to his purse-strings."

And old Della Braccia almost forgot his jealousy during the first part of the evening in the triumph and pride of her success. Yes,

it was pleasant to see how all the young men envied him; even the jokes which now and then reached his ears amused him, he had made the same in his young days. And partly from the habit of tender solicitude, and partly from fear of his jealousy being suddenly aroused, every now and then as she passed him in the room while crossing it either to introduce dancers to some young girl, or to have a chat with some one she thought seemed neglected, she would stop and say something to him. Once she laid her hand upon his arm, and once she whispered something in his ear, and he laughed.

He was glad that she showed that she liked him.

Then, as the evening wore on, the old demon was aroused. He noticed that she danced twice with Vremi, that he hardly ever left her side; and once he had found Vremi and Luigi deep in conversation in a doorway, and they had started when he came up. His son made a movement towards him, but the old man passed on as if he had not seen him. He had greeted him when he came in, but he had no intention of pretending that they could ever be friends. He knew, too, that in his heart his son would appreciate his reasons and understand them.



An evil expression passed over Luigi's face.

"Do you see that?" he said to Vremi; but Vremi, who knew that it was already a great step, Luigi being here to-night, only laughed.

"Don't pay any attention; leave it all to that divine creature he has married; she can twist him round her little finger, and evidently she has taken a fancy to you."

"A fancy—not she! She has refused to dance with me three times."

"That is because she is afraid you are too much in a hurry, my dear boy."

Vremi gave a fatuous laugh as he went off to claim another dance with the young Contessa.

"Say a good word for me," whispered Luigi, as he went off.

But Vremi forgot to mention Luigi, or he thought him quite capable of fighting his own battles; instead, he put in a word for himself.

After the dance he persuaded her to go into the conservatory with him; she was hot and tired, and the idea appealed to her. After all, she said to herself, she was not a child, and she was in her own house.

But she was not prepared for Vremi's outburst of admiration.

How could she stand the life? he asked her; and Lisa immediately became rigid.

"I do not understand you," she said, getting up from her seat. "I think, please, that we had better go back."

Vremi bit his lip and frowned. Nothing made him more angry than a rebuff from a pretty woman. It must be conceded that he had not received very many, but this was the second time; he still had to pay her out for another slight at another ball not a year ago.

"You will yet come off your high horse, Signora mia!" he said to himself viciously, while the thought insisted that all this was merely a pose, that she was a hypocrite, afraid to quarrel with her bread and butter; a fool, or a consummate actress, playing the part of indifference in order to goad him into insistence and pursuance.

Della Braccia had not seen them disappear, but he had seen them reappear again, and he had noticed that Lisa looked disturbed. As he approached them he noticed also that the expression on her face changed rapidly, as if she were making an effort to seem serene, and that she parted from her cavalier coldly, without her usual word of banter or kindness.

Regardless of his guests, regardless of how it would sound to her—to her, the girl to whom he had never spoken a cross word, he went up close to her, and whispered angrily:



"I forbid you to dance again with that man! I forbid you—do you hear?"

For one instant his swift anger startled Lisa, then in an instant she recovered herself. She was much too well bred to make a scene before her guests, or to allow one if she could help it. She had no intention of dancing with Vremi again, but she also had no intention of submitting to tyranny of this kind. She looked him full in the face.

"I think you do not know what you are saying, Della Braccia, or who you are speaking to."

She passed on quietly through the ballroom, leaving him standing there. But without being able to hear what passed, Vremi had noted the scene; and Della Braccia's angry expression, and the wife's cold attitude as she passed in front of him and calmly turned to speak to the Barone del Valle, confirmed his suspicions that all was not as smooth between them as people said.

"It would not be long," he said to himself, "before Luigi was avenged as well as himself."



### CHAPTER XI

THE night of the ball, or rather at early dawn, for the dance was kept up with spirit till past four o'clock, Donna Lisa went to her own apartments and locked the door, while Della Braccia saw to the departure of the few men guests who lingered a few moments in the hall. Della Braccia had hoped to see her after the dance, to tell her that he was sorry for his outburst, and how beautiful she had looked, how every one had raved about her; above all, to try and find out if Vremi had made love to her. He believed firmly that it was so. But he was doomed to disappointment, and the fact that she had gone straight to bed confirmed his suspicions. His troubles were about to begin. and he saw before him only two alternatives, to take her away, or to put up with the situation. This last alternative he was too well acquainted with his own character, to believe possible.

But Lisa was not thinking of Vremi as she undressed. She was angry, and her anger expressed itself in the jerky way in which she removed her jewels and let down her hair.



It was becoming too much of a good thing; soon she would not be able to bear it. He had spoiled her evening, her triumphant evening, in which she knew that she had shone on the firmament of Venice society, brilliantly as a star on a clear night.

She had been so happy in the thought that now at last he was going to lay aside this unwise jealousy and espionage. And she had the consciousness of complete innocence. By his act, Della Braccia had awakened all the recalcitrance which is the result of oppression. Once weary in mind and body she had sunk on to a low chair by the window and told herself that she could not go on—she could not, the sense of restraint, almost of fear, was wearing her out. She remembered Luigi's words, intended, although she had not realised it at the moment, to work their poison in her mind.

"He killed my mother by his jealousy." Yes, she could imagine a woman being driven to death by this constant irritation, but what was she to do? To give up seeing everybody? Once she asked herself, with a little touch of irony, whether Della Braccia imagined that he sufficed a woman in her whole life. Yes, he had said that he wanted to be her only interest, and he certainly did all he could to fill her life. Presently her wrath died down.

It was not for ever after all, only she hated herself for wishing for the end. If only he were not like that, she would never want him to die.

Yet presently, when her thoughts reverted to Vremi, she asked herself whether there was not some justification in his anxiety, not about herself—no, the absurdity lay in his jealousy of her personally, but in his suspicions of other men. How infamous of Vremi to speak to her like that! Vremi, whom she hardly knew, and certainly did not like.

What could have possessed him? And there were other men with whom she had supped and danced and talked, who had given her the idea that, if they dared, they would tell her that she was beautiful, pity her for being married to the old man.

That was what she could not stand, that they should pity her for what she had done of her own free will, with her eyes open. Was it possible, then, that Leonardo had spoken truly, voiced public opinion, when he had said: "You must not sell yourself"?

If this was so, then every one must despise her. The thought was gall. And the next morning she slept late, conscious in her halfwaking that Della Braccia came to her door again and again.

"If she does not wake soon," Viola said to

one of the servants, "he will throw himself into the canal."

And now the morning after the ball they had their first scene, if it could be called a scene: the earnest conversation in which Lisa told him that she would not stand his constant jealousy, that if he spoke to her like that again she would go back to her parents.

To her he was penitent as a child, the while the fact that she made an attempt to change his moods, aroused feelings of discomfort within him which she could not have imagined the existence of.

Was she beginning to take a fancy to Vremi, and was that why she wanted more liberty?

But she was far from realising, or even imagining, that she had given the last dance at the Palazzo Braccia, that the apparently insignificant events of the preceding evening were to have far-reaching results which would wring her heart. Later, it seemed to her that everything that befel her dated from the ball at which she had worn the rainbow dress and opals. Viola had told her that opals were unlucky, but the Braccia opals were historic, and historical things are supposed to be unable to evade a certain amount of tragedy, yet for that they are not reckoned unlucky.

The evening after the day of the dance



Lisa's gondolier was taken sick, and a new one was engaged by the major-domo.

It was an incident which made no impression on Lisa at the time, yet which later made her take much more interest—a nervous interest—even in small circumstances.

And because she had insisted on having more liberty, the old Count did not interfere so much in her coming and going now.

"For heaven's sake, caro," she had said, "don't make yourself and me ridiculous. Leave me my friends and go and see yours: lead a man's life-go to your club." And he tried to do as she said; but always when she came back from anywhere he was waiting for her, walking up and down the hall, or smoking on the balcony even if the weather was cold, watching the canal for her return. Then one evening she went to her mother's to dine, returning late. Her mother had told her a rather interesting piece of news about one of their friends, and she was thinking over it with half-closed lids, leaning back in the gondola. Suddenly she became aware that the canal looked darker than usual, and she leaned forward towards the gondolier to ask him about it; then she uttered a cry. They were not going towards the Palazzo, and the gondolier paid no attention to her question:



"Pietro, where are you going? I want to go back; this is the way to the Lido. Take me back; do you hear me?"

A sudden terror seized her. Who was this man whom they had engaged as gondolier while the other was ill? Yet, instead, the gondolier was plying his oars as rapidly as possible in the other direction. She looked around helplessly: there seemed to be no other gondolas in sight. She had not noticed how late it was when she left her mother's house. As a matter of fact, it was nearly midnight, and the Venetians are an early people.

Once more she called out imperatively:

"Pietro, do you not hear me? What are you doing?"

Was he deaf, she asked herself, or drunk, or, worse still, mad?

They were a long way now up the canal, in the opposite direction to the Casa Braccia.

She clutched the sides of the gondola, seized with sudden, indescribable terror. The night, the loneliness, and this man at the prowhow awful it all seemed!

And beneath the waters of the canal, deep and dark, and looking thick like melted lead. For one moment her wits deserted her; then she stood up.



"If you do not stop, I shall shriek for help."

For a moment the man looked up, and it seemed to her that she had seen his eyes before. Instinctively her hand went out to clasp a jewel at her throat. Murders had been committed for less than the value of the small bauble which shone amongst her laces.

She uttered a cry, but the sound of the waters seemed to swallow it, although, as a matter of fact, it had resounded, echoed across to the Palazzos on the other side, with something weird, horrific in it.

"For heaven's sake, don't scream!" said the man, speaking at last.

"Certainly I will scream. I will scream, or I will throw myself into the canal if you don't turn round immediately!"

"Sit down, I beg of you. I will turn round."
Where had she heard the voice before?
Her memory, notwithstanding the confusion of her mind, tried to pierce remote corners, in which this voice had sounded before—a peculiar voice, vibrating, mysterious, insincere.

At a movement from her the gondola oscillated a little.

"I beg of you have patience." The man was fairly agitated now.

"I will have no patience. I command you to turn, or—"

In another instant the head of the gondola had turned, and they were gliding backwards towards the Villa Braccia, and Ugolino Vremi was sitting beside her, murmuring passionately into her ear.

"What a frightened bird it is! I was not going to hurt you. I wanted to get you away to some quiet spot where we could talk."

"Talk at midnight on the canal! Are you mad?"

"Yes—mad with love of you!" He tried to grasp her hand. He had an immense faith in his own power of fascination; but she threw it away.

"It is infamous!" She was angry. He could see it even beneath the feeble rays of the lamps. He had not taken her the right way: she was not like other women. Most of them he had found liked dash, fire, courage, in wooing. Perhaps it was only that she was afraid.

"What is infamous—to love you?" He rose as he spoke to guide the gondola with his oar. "In that case, Signora, the fault is your own: you ought not to have been so lovely."



"Infamous to pretend to be a gondolier, in order to insinuate yourself into my presence."

"All is fair in love and war, fair lady." He plunged the oar into the dividing waters as he spoke, then turned round, holding it with his left hand.

"Ah! what have you or I to do with love? I thought you were at least a gentleman!"

He laughed, although her words made him furious.

"At least, and at most?" he asked insolently. But she did not answer him. How slowly they seemed to be progressing!

"Please make haste." She spoke curtly.

"Are you in such a hurry to get back?" He spoke scoffingly, yet there was the lingering tenderness in his tone, caressing, with which an Italian always addresses a woman. Then, as she still remained silent: "Ah, you must not forget that Pietro, the gondolier, hears a great deal! I heard you and the Count yesterday in the gondola. He is jealous: he makes you miserable."

Lisa blushed.

How awful, how awful to think that this man knew her husband was jealous—imagined that she was unhappy! She had talked openly, ignoring the gondolier as those accustomed to

many servants so often ignore them—considering them machines.

Then she burst out:

"My gondolier is more honourable than that! He attends to his business — to his gondola. He does not listen like a——" She broke off for want of a word, but she had made him furious. Now the score he held against her was growing; the day he wiped it out it would go hard with her.

"Yet since I did—since I heard—I know that you are not happy."

"You make a great mistake; but I beg that you will not discuss the matter further with me. I wish to go back, as far as possible to forget that there are people so low."

"You are hard on a man," he began in another instant in another tone; then still holding the oar, he dropped on his knees close to her: "Signora, why not confide in me? why not say that you are unhappy, and let me see you sometimes? Ah, you do not know what a friend you have in me!"

She tapped her foot a little impatiently.

"Please, Count Vremi, cease speaking, and take me back as quickly as possible."

She turned her face away from him.



Surely, surely Della Braccia was not far wrong, since men could behave like this in Venice.

Now she kept her eyes persistently on the waters, on the far-away twinkling lights on the piazza in the cafés, at the feeble, pale, cold, quivering ribands of light reflected in the canal, from the lamps.

Vremi sighed, but resumed his work. Soon they were at the gates of the Casa Braccia.

"So are you satisfied, Signora, that I meant no harm?"

Still she did not answer him, and he peered at her face a little anxiously in the darkness.

Would she tell her husband? He thought not; and if she did, it would be easy to tell him that she had made an appointment with him: all he wanted was to sow discord between them in the furrows he felt sure the old Count's jealousy had already made, in the furrows that were inevitable between her youth and beauty and his age. "He is so jealous that he would believe anything," he said to himself as he reached to ring the bell.

But there was no need to ring the bell. The old Count opened the door himself. Was it the light streaming from the door which blanched his face like that? Vremi asked himself; and for an instant his courage failed



him. What if in a fit of passion he killed Donna Lisa?

And as the old man approached him he felt an impulse to seize him and throttle him and throw his body into the canal. At this hour no one would know; but the idea passed. It had been a moment's insanity, he told himself, or of fury against her and her husband, against fate, which had set this woman, the fairest in Venice, beyond his reach, and given her a cold, proud heart—for it was coldness or pride, he told himself fatuously, which made her resist the blandishments of one of the most fascinating cavaliers of Venice.

But even in his anger, and his anger had reached white-heat, the old Count did not forget to be a gentleman. He was angrier than he had ever been in his life, even with his first wife, and she had not been pliant and affectionate like Lisa, but then he loved Lisa a hundred times more, or had. To-night, he had told himself that she was false; he had almost grown to hate her in these long hours of waiting.

Ten! Eleven! It is not the right thing to be late on the canal except on days of illuminations, or when the canal is crowded for some special occasion, and it was unlike her mother to let her leave so late. Perhaps



her mother was ill: he always encouraged her devotion to her mother—she was a good daughter.

At half-past eleven he had sent a servant to the Palazzo Di Val Moreno. His message had filled her parents with dismay: what could have happened? They sent word that she had left, that by now she would be at home.

"Do not say at what hour she left," her mother had said to him, fearing she knew not what. Then at midnight the man had come back.

The Signora Contessa had not returned.

And this time her father went back with the man and spent half an hour with his son-in-law.

It was impossible to conjecture what had happened; accidents on the canal are rare. He tried to soothe the old husband.

"I will go to the police, if you like," he told him.

"And all Venice will know to-morrow of her escapade!"

"It is no escapade! You do not know what you are talking about; perhaps she felt ill and stopped at a chemist's or a doctor's."

But Della Braccia was quite sure that if she felt ill she would have come home. Already his thoughts were busy with Vremi.



At half-past twelve the Marchese had gone back to reassure his wife, to discuss it with her, to decide what was to be done.

And now at one o'clock she arrived as if nothing was the matter.

The old Count helped her out of the gondola, but there was no word of greeting, no smile. What he had to say would have to be said with closed doors, and the sight of his face froze Lisa. So men looked when murder was in their hearts. A loathing for Vremi took possession of her, and, standing on the steps, she said in a clear voice which rang out on the stillness, and carried on the words with a resonance which was almost metallic:

"Please dismiss this gondolier, caro; he does not know the canal."

Then she mounted the steps and disappeared across the mosaic-paved hall, and up the stairs to her room, dazed, like one in a dream.



### CHAPTER XII

ALL Venice was talking about it, only Lisa did not know, because she was back at Le Cadore, and because those who knew would not tell her. Her mother was nursing the old Count in Venice, and Lisa was in punishment in the country villa. It was an absurd situation, and one which she had no intention of putting up with for long; but in her present mood, while she was still smarting from his words as if she had been lashed with a whip, till she could come to some conclusion, it was perhaps the best place she could be in, although the fact of how Venice must be talking, humiliated her.

She could choose, the old Count had said that ill-fated night, between going right away or returning for the winter to Le Cadore, but, so far as they were both concerned, Venice was at an end. In vain she used arguments and threats, appealing to her parents for the first time. The old man was like a maniac, and



her father, overwhelmed at the sudden revelation of the old man's disposition, had persuaded her to go.

"It is best that you should rest from all this worry," he told her, "best to leave him to recover his senses." And the following day, without even taking leave of him, she had gone back to Le Cadore, taking Viola with her. Viola, who did not dare express her thoughts, but who to herself had declared that this kind of thing could not go on, that it would kill Donna Lisa before it killed the old Count. Giuseppe had been right after all when he had said: "Questa coda non è di questo gatto."

It did not do for Winter to mate with May. What Viola desired to know more than anything else, was why the gondolier had been sent away. It was not possible that he had been guilty of impertinence to the Contessa. That was not to be imagined for a moment; and the story amongst the servants was that he had been in the pay of a bel signore, who had tried to kidnap Donna Lisa. Viola was sure, quite sure, that Lisa herself had not been party to the arrangement. She believed in her as in a saint, and who should know her better, or so well, as Viola?

But what had hurt Lisa most of all was her



mother's doubt about her. Before she left she said:

"Tell me, cara, it is not true that you had an assignation with Vremi! Ah no." And while she asked if it were true, she had said to herself that it would not be so extraordinary after all, for Vremi was very good-looking and young.

Apparently the Marchesa also thought that she, Lisa, had sold herself. What a strange, ignorant, wicked world it was!

And her mother promised to follow in a few days, to write every day what was happening at the Palazzo Braccia. It was like fate, she thought, to turn and taunt them and flaunt scandal in their faces. It had been too good to be true, the marriage with the old Braccia, and all his wealth, after all these years of pinching, coming their way.

Then she had written:

"He is ill and I am nursing him. It is better for you to stay quietly at Le Cadore. When he is better he will go to you."

No wonder he was ill, Lisa thought. When one gets as angry as that it is enough to make one ill. But the sense of injustice hardened her. She did not offer to go and nurse him, and the fact that she did not do so confirmed



the old Count's suspicions that she had wearied of him—if she had ever cared for him—that most likely of all she wished him dead, and had only married him for his money.

But there was no need for suspicions: he had it from Vremi's lips.

Le Cadore in winter? It was absurd! Lisa was angrier than she had ever been in her life. That he should not have believed her story that night, that he should have lost his temper and said all sorts of things he did not mean, that did not offend her so much, because, now that she knew him, she had come to look on these fits of temper, as the fits of delusion of a madman, or the proofs of growing childishness; but that he should not believe the story she told him the next day, in cold blood, that she would never forgive. She consulted the priest at Le Cadore—the priest who had confirmed her.

But he found it difficult to advise her except to be patient. Patience, that was all she could do—to be patient and suffer. He spoke from a cornucopia of experience. He had seen so much trouble in married lives, and he could well imagine that the old Count foresaw dangers. He wanted to believe her, but he, too, was not quite sure that she was telling the truth about Vremi.



To dress like a gondolier in the Braccia's livery, and then to take her away down the canal at midnight! It was many years since the priest had read a novel, but since Donna Lisa had come to Le Cadore he felt as if he had read one. People don't do that kind of thing in the present day. Yet remembering Della Braccia's first wife, he could also imagine that the young wife had a great deal to put up with, and if she were not patient, then indeed she would suffer as the first wife had done. And there being no divorce in the Roman Church, he combated all Lisa's arguments about separation.

"At your age, Signora Contessa, with your looks"—the words escaped him, then made him blush—"it could only end in trouble—what a life for a young woman!—and in the end you would fall in love, and then . . ."

Yes, Lisa could not help recognising that he was right; and as the days followed on each other she grew calmer, and once more rose to the heights of her own standards, which were high.

There was only one thing to do, she told herself, if she wanted peace, to give up Venice, to give up everything, and to lead a quiet country life devoted to country pursuits, attending to the poor. It loomed cheerless enough, but it would be better than these upheavals. She could not stand them.

She had hoped that Vremi would write and apologise, and say something which would enable her to prove that she had nothing to do with this midnight adventure.

Presently her really charming good self asserted itself, and she wrote the old Count a charming letter, asking if he would like her to come and nurse him. Once she sent Viola with a basket of flowers to see if she could be of any use, to bring her word how he was; but he did not answer the letter, and Viola had nothing to tell; on the contrary, her account of her visit filled Donna Lisa with amazement.

"The Marchesa received me, but she would not let me go into the Count's room; and when I came downstairs she followed me, so that I could not get a word with Carlo."

"You are not to speak to any of the servants, you are not to speak to any one-Go straight back to the Nobilissima and tell her that I will come to-morrow."

But the next day the Marchesa sent a telegram:

"Not so well. Writing."

And Lisa began to think that she must go back to him. No one could nurse him as she



could, and then she could persuade him that he was mistaken—quiet him. She began to grow alarmed. What was this mysterious malady, and why did her mother not want Viola to talk to the servants? They were treating her like a child; soon she would not stand it any longer, she would go to Venice. Never as long as she lived did she forget those long, weary, anxious days at Le Cadore, days in which everything she began to do lost its charm, on account of the restlessness of her mind.

And she began taking long walks with her dog. It was cold after Venice, and the rapid walking, in her warm furs, brought a sense of life, of movement, of energy. She had never seen the forests under their white blankets, never realised the beauty of a winter in the country, never seen one since she was a child, and her mother had been ill one winter, and nobody had gone to Venice that year.

Then one afternoon she had pushed her way into the woods which bounded Della Braccia's place, and led to the Norinis. Part of the wood belonged to each, but she did not think of that. She only wondered whether there were any other young women of her age walking alone in dark forests on winter afternoons, and Leonardo's words came back to her:



"You must not sell yourself."

If she had sold herself she had made a pretty bad bargain, she thought grimly. What was the use of her wealth, of her beautiful gowns, of these rich Russian sables which hung about her throat, and had here and there reddish gleams which resembled the tints in her auburn hair, if she was to be treated like this?

She was in prison—a gilded prison, yet a prison for all that. Something of the emotion, the desire for freedom which had swayed her on her wedding morning came back to her.

There must be something wrong with life, she told herself, if what one thought to do rightly ended like this.

"Lisa!"

Just as he had uttered the words that morning, just as he had appeared to her then, like a vision, so he appeared now, his brown-grey suit seeming as if it belonged to the brown-grey of the trunks of the trees. Only the vitality in the eyes, the pallor of the face detaching him from the haze which floated around the trees—the brown, damp haze which was half mist, half shadow.

"Lisa!" he had said that morning, and involuntarily he uttered the old familiar name now. Then as he took off his hat he corrected



himself: "Signora Contessa," he said, and it seemed to her as if he said the words with a tinge of scorn. How gladly would she be the old Lisa again—the happy, careless Lisa whose greatest sorrow had been that she had not a new frock!

She bowed, and with a habit that was steadily growing upon her, turned away nervously. The emotions and experiences of the past week were still vivid, and it seemed to her as if even at this moment the old Count might appear suddenly on her horizon, with that terrible expression he had worn when she got out of the gondola.

And as she turned away, he fancied that she was still angry with him for what he had said that morning, for his not having gone to her wedding.

She had thought him far away, or she would not have walked in that direction; and he had thought her at Venice, or perhaps he would not have come. Yet, since they had both met he wanted to speak to her—to tell her that he would never annoy her again—that she must forget and forgive what he had said, only think of him as a friend who would always care for her, and who wished her well. None but himself knew the battle it had been to reach this frame of mind, but he had reached

it, and in all the consciousness of innocence he held out his hand.

"Do not go away without forgiving me," he said.

Once more she looked around nervously, then she said:

"I have nothing to forgive, only . . . I did not sell myself—I am very fond of the Count."

He laughed. She was like a child in her pride.

"You remember when we played as children, I had always to give in," he said. "Well, it is the same now. I know that you care for the Count;" then he added: "And it is right, of course."

Somehow, his words disappointed her, chilled her.

He had ceased to care for her, it seemed; and now for the first time she felt that all this time, the knowledge of his love had kept her from despair.

And as she turned homewards he accompanied her, talking on indifferent subjects—about his studies, about Venice, about Italy, now and then breaking into a "Do you remember?" which seemed to her like a knife-thrust.

Yes, she remembered, to-day, when it was



too late. And because the forest had once seemed like the temple of surprise and revelation, so now to-day it seemed to her as if she had suddenly awakened, suddenly for the first time realised that she was alive, that she was a human being, a woman—he a human being, a man; and that both were alive, alive in a world given over to theories and visions of the brain, and a few acts, and of which the dominant emotion lies in the extent of the interest we take in one another. Ever after the forest and Leonardo Norini were confused together in her mind. So much were they part of each other, that when she reached the confines of the wood, she paused, thinking that he would say good-bye.

"I will walk back with you," he said with his bright smile. "It is growing late and dark."

But her face clouded.

"No, no; do not trouble." Then she added, to hide her nervousness: "I am at home, you know, here now."

"Yes, that is true." His eyes wandered across the terraces, to where the big villa stood looking rather grey and bleak in the wintry evening. "You over there, and I here, eh?" He spoke a little bitterly. It was the first even indirect allusion he had made to

any sentiment, to any memory of what lay between them. "And I suppose that the boundary must never be passed!"

"It never could be," she said to herself, but aloud she answered gaily enough:

"Yet I have passed it to-day, since I went into your forest."

He would have liked to ask her if she had known that he was back, but he did not do so. Perhaps, after all, it was better not to know.

Then she added, holding out her hand, and glancing in the direction of the house:

"One day you must come and see us, when Della Braccia comes—when he is better."

"Perhaps." He held out his hand, but dropped hers almost immediately; and she stepped through the intervening glade and was hidden from his sight in an instant.

It seemed in the order of things that as she walked across the gardens and by a back way towards the front of the house, that she should see a carriage approaching, a hired carriage with luggage on it, and a servant on the box whose face she could not discern at this distance, but whom she felt instinctively was Carlo, the Count's valet.

Her eyes were bright and sparkling, and her cheeks flushed with the cold, invigorating



air. It had been good, too, to talk to her childhood's friend, to have placed their friendship on a new footing which would make intercourse possible, to have wiped out in a sense, so far as they could be wiped out, the words he had spoken on her wedding morning. She didn't even know how pretty and bright she looked as the carriage swept past her, then drew up, as the servant recognised her.

Yes, it was the Count—the Count, who had decided to arrive unexpectedly, and who had started in despite of his doctor, and in despite of the Marchesa's warnings that he was not fit to travel.

And, indeed, he looked very white and ill, "as white as if his face had been chalked," said Viola in her realistic manner, when she saw him.

"Caro!" Lisa climbed up into the carriage and kissed him.

"Eh—take care, take care—my arm, you know."

Then she noticed for the first time that his arm was bandaged, and that he wore another bandage across his temple just under his cap.

"But, caro, what has happened?"

She had made up her mind, if he did arrive, to behave exactly as if nothing had happened, to be calm and cheerful—at least outwardly.

"Ah, you haven't heard yet, eh? I wanted to tell you myself: I have news for you." There was something malicious almost in the way he spoke. "But wait till we reach home; I am feeling weak."

She took his other hand in hers, and held it till they reached the end of the drive. Then for the first time she became aware of how feeble he was. Carlo and the butler had almost to carry him; they took him into the hall and made him rest a moment in an armchair.

And while they were standing there, the butler handed her a telegram.

"He has started—meet him at the station.—VAL MORENO."

It was from her mother, announcing his departure, prompted to give her daughter notice of his arrival, by she could not have told what instinct.

"When did that arrive?" the old Count asked the butler suspiciously.

"About two hours ago. I looked for the Signora, but she had gone out."

"Where had you gone? How was it that you were out so long?" The old habit was strong as ever.

Her eyes met his unflinching, but they seemed to express clearly: "No more of



this, my friend; we have had enough," and she answered:

"I went for a walk; I have taken to walking every afternoon, and shall keep to it. It suits me."

She spoke with decision and a clearness of diction he had never heard from her—almost it was as if she declared war, but he was tired out with the journey. Later it would be time to tell her what he had decided, what he wished.

They took him upstairs and laid him on his bed, and for a few minutes the servant fidgeted about him administering restoratives, pouring out his medicine, emptying the contents of a bag.

"That will do, that will do," he said at last impatiently.

Then, as the door closed, he made an effort and sat up on his bed, looking so pale and drawn, so thin and old that Lisa was horrified.

"Do you know what is the matter with my arm?" He touched it lightly with the fingers of the other hand. "You don't know, eh?—well, I killed him; we had a duel, and I killed him—killed Ugolino Vremi." He fell back on his pillow, laughing.



# CHAPTER XIII

LISA looked at him in astonishment, but there was no cry from her lips as he expected, no sign that she felt the death of this man, only a sort of horror of the deed. Della Braccia, who knew life, who could read expressions with the experience of years, told himself that if she had cared for Vremi she would have shown it more than this. If she did feel it, then indeed she was the most consummate actress living.

"You killed him?"

She uttered the words in utter amazement, as if the fact that Vremi was dead did not matter nearly so much, as the fact that he had done it.

"Yes; we fought a duel, and I killed him. He grazed me a bit here, but that is nothing; I killed him at the third shot, now he won't bother us any more. We can go back to Venice."

For an instant something dazed Lisa, in the easy way in which he spoke of having killed a man. It horrified her to think that



she had indirectly been the cause of Vremi's death, and yet it was a relief. But there was something else which struck her, which made an extraordinary impression. The idea of the daring of this old man—the way he fought duels and came off the vanquisher, while the other, the younger man, died. It made her almost hysterical, and she burst out laughing.

"You are wonderful, wonderful," she said, "to kill a man as if you were five-and-twenty—to be wounded, and then to come away as if nothing were the matter!"

He enjoyed her admiration; he had ranked himself now alongside a young and vigorous man. He had always been known as a good swordsman, a good pistol-shot.

"I am a tough old bird, eh, Lisa?"

Once more the tone almost of maliciousness pierced.

And later on in the evening he told her how it had come about, how after she had gone upstairs, just as Vremi was pushing off again he had dropped his oar, and the old Count, who was watching him, wondering, noticed that he had one finger missing on one hand.

"I didn't know," she said calmly, and the old Count wondered if she were speaking the truth.

The fact, coming as it did at a time when Vremi was constantly in his thoughts, had aroused his attention, and he had leaned forward to look at the man's hand as he stretched it out to regain his oar, and beneath the gleam from the lamp of the water-gate, he had caught sight of a seal ring on the little finger with the Vremi crest upon it. The younger man had been unawarè of his scrutiny, but, as he pushed off, the old Count called after him and he came back.

It would be fun, he thought, to have a battle of words with the old Count. Evidently he had recognised him, and he wasn't going to run away. With all their faults the Vremis were never cowards, unless it can be named cowardice, when a man persecutes and bullies a woman. And in an instant he was standing in front of the old Count on the steps of the Palazzo; a pale moon rising behind the campanile made both their faces visible to each other, but the whitest of the two was not the Count's.

"I understand now what my wife, the Countess, meant," said the Count. "She told me to dismiss you, and I do it like that!" He slashed his hand across Vremi's face.

An oath escaped Vremi's lips.

"So we meet to-morrow: you will find me



at the club at twelve," the old man had said; and Vremi laughed.

"I don't fight with old men." Vremi spoke scoffingly. "My dear Count, you had far better be making your will and cutting out your son, for, before you know where you are, you will be taking your last trip on a gondola, and needing neither my services nor any gondoliers."

"We meet to-morrow at twelve," repeated the old Count; "and you choose the weapon."

"I say pistols now!" retorted Vremi. "If I said swords I should simply run you through as if with a skewer; your hand is not so steady as it used to be."

"As you will."

Then the two men bowed gravely, and the old Count re-entered the Palazzo and banged to the door.

His blood was tingling, and the dormant, smouldering fire of former years awakened as it awakens again in an ancient war horse, at the smell of gunpowder.

"I will kill him like a dog," he said to himself, as he went up the stairs to find Lisa.

And Vremi had fastened Donna Lisa's gondola to the iron ring and walked home by the back streets. He had taken care not to



leave his own anywhere near, and there were none about at this hour which he could hire. He whistled as he went.

"He has some fire left, the old boy," he said to himself. "What a fool I was not to knock him on the head as he stood there! Luigi at least would have been grateful; and as for the Contessima, she will be a widow anyway before the week is out. But he is a brave old buck, anyhow. I wish he were a bit younger; it would add at least to the romance."

That it would go badly with him he never dreamed for a moment; he had heard of the old Count's deeds of prowess in his youth some thirty years ago, before he himself was born, but Vremi prided himself on his skill with sword and pistol alike. And the next day seconds had been found, and the duel had been fought. The old Count's second was an old chum who had been his second in former duels, and who knew something of his prowess, his cool head, his steady hand.

"Hold out your hand, Della Braccia, and let's see whether you have lost that straight, stiff way you had;" and Della Braccia's hand had trembled just a little, but wonderfully little for his age.

"I am beginning to be sorry that he chose pistols," he said; but the old Count only laughed.



"You will see that I will kill him," he said, laughing.

And it was lest she should hear of it and try and stop him, more than because he was angry with her, that Della Braccia had made her go to Le Cadore.

Now Lisa looked at him with a new wonder. He almost seemed to appear young in her eyes, and she was unaware that a faint disappointment seized her at the apparent rejuvenation that had come over him. She had told herself that she would be patient till the end, but now it seemed that if he could do these terrible and wonderful things, there was no end—would never be.

But what the old Count did not tell her was that Vremi, in order to embitter his last years, had told him that he had met Donna Lisa of her own free will: that they had arranged to meet again. And when Vremi was dying the old man had knelt by his side, and said:

"For the love of God, Vremi, as you are dying, as you hope to be saved from hell, tell me is it true that she made the appointment—do not die with a lie on your lips!"

And with a wicked laugh, Vremi, trying to uplift his right hand, the one on which the finger was missing, cried out:

"It is true. I swear it!"

All this he did not tell Donna Lisa; if he had done so, she still could not have persuaded him that it was not true. Had she known it, perhaps their conversation the next morning would have been different, for the next morning the old Count was better, stronger for the change of air, and perhaps calmed by Lisa's presence; and after breakfast he opened the subject she had at once dreaded and looked forward to, which was to decide the future for her, by remarking:

"A few days of this air will set me up, and then we can go back to Venice."

He certainly was not prepared for her answer. That she had no interest in Vremi, not one of a lasting kind, was evident. She had slept well, her fresh cheeks, her calm, clear look bore witness to that, and from his room, sleepless and feverish as his wound made him, as the aged generally are, he would have heard had she been restless, for her room opened out of his. No. she did not care for Vremi -that in itself was some comfort; but that during these days she had been thinking out the situation between herself and him. and mapped out her future course of conduct, was a surprise. When he spoke of going back to Venice she rose from her seat, and he noted the grace and dignity with which she moved,



unconscious that a new dignity had come with a new strength.

"No, dear, we will not go back to Venice. If you want to go, you can do so; I shall not return to Venice. We will remain here quietly, living out our lives as happily as possible. But we will not return to Venice."

He looked at her, half incredulous. This move on her part was so unexpected that he could hardly believe his ears.

"But why, carina—why? Vremi is dead now, and of course there will be a little talk; the authorities will make a fuss, but they will not arrest me—the police I have already seen; and Guiliardi is my friend (Guiliardi was the Minister of the interior)—they will not arrest me. And Vremi will not annoy you any more. Certainly we will return to Venice."

"You ask me my reason, Giorgio." She rarely called him by his Christian name, and the fact that she did so proclaimed that there was something unusual in the air. "I have many reasons: one, that you have made me ridiculous in Venice by this duel, that I object to notoriety, and that it would be very disagreeable to me to be in Venice this winter; then another is that because Vremi is dead, that will not prevent that you will be jealous of the next man who speaks to



me, and probably pick a quarrel with him, and—who knows?—kill him. We shall be the talk of Venice, you and I, and I object to it; but the two last reasons are the chief ones. I cannot, I will not submit to the life we lead there. My whole amusement and enjoyment are spoiled: you have made me nervous and unhappy, and we shall henceforward live out of the world, where there is no chance of your seeing people who make you jealous. Later, when our friends come from Venice—in the summer, if you wish it—we can go away . . ."

She paused for an instant.

"You said that there was another reason." The fact that she suppressed one, made him think that it was the most important of all.

"Yes. I have grown fond of Le Cadore; I enjoy the freedom, the country life. You sent me away here, and now I intend to remain."

There was something in the finality of her speech, her words, which precluded argument or discussion. Now, if he wanted her to do otherwise, he would have to plead. He realised that he had gone too far, that there were limitations to her patience. With his first wife he would have threatened or insisted, and finally conquered. With this woman, whom he loved almost with a boy's first young love



he would have to cajole, to entreat, if he wanted to obtain his own way.

"Well, carina, of course if you wish; but, remember, you told me to dismiss the gondolier."

"It would have been sufficient to do as I suggested, to send him away—not to cry out to the whole town that he had tried to take me to the Lido, that with difficulty I made him bring me home."

"Is that true, Lisa-tell me, is that true?"

The anxiety in his face nauseated her, the way this man's whole life seemed to hang on the certainty of her belonging body and soul to him.

Her eyes met his coldly.

"Certainly it is true, and I beg that you will not even ask me so again. I told you the night I returned word for word what had been said; I explained to you what had happened. That should be enough."

She walked to the other side of the room, stood a moment at the window looking out on to the woodland; then sat down at her writing-table. She had to write to her mother, and the morning's post had brought a budget of invitations, forwarded from the Palazzo. Presently she and he would have to agree as to what was to be said to explain their leaving Venice.



To put it on his ill health seemed to her the easiest method, but he hated to be looked upon as an invalid. Every day he said:

"Oh, I am much stronger to-day. It was nothing, only a scratch; I shall be all right in a day or two."

And his eyes followed her almost greedily, as if he grudged the privacy of her inward thoughts, as if he chafed against the impossibility of knowing what she really thought, and what had actually happened the night she returned so late. Sometimes—thanks to the iniquitous words of Vremi—he imagined dreadful things; sometimes he told himself that there had not been a word of truth in them; and while he mistrusted her, he hated himself for his mistrust, without the power to reserve judgment, to be happy, till one day he had proof certain.

"Cara, I wish I didn't love you so much," he said presently.

She smiled, shaking her head sadly, bitterly almost.

"That is not love that you have for me. If you had, you would not make me so miserable. No, Giorgio, you do not love me, and soon you will have killed mine for you."

Her words moved him, while he recognised that just what he dreaded most he was



himself laying the foundation of, by his treatment of her.

"I hate myself, carissima. I have been a brute; but you do not know—I have always been like that. I used to drive my mother to despair. I was jealous of my sister, of my mother, of my companions, of every one. I have always been jealous; and the more I love, the more jealous I am, and now I am too old to change. I told you that I was jealous before we married."

"Yes, you told me; but how could I imagine,
—besides, I thought that you trusted me.
How can you love where you do not trust?"

"When my sister died she said to me," he went on, almost as if he were proud of his particular characteristic, "'If you do not change your disposition, you will cause misery, not only to yourself, but to all those that love you.' I know it, yet I cannot help it, carissima, you must treat me like a foolish old man who has a form of madness."

When he talked like that Lisa felt that she could forgive him.

"Yet why not try and overcome it? Why not try and trust, till you are convinced that you are being deceived?"

"Ah, if I could! but then, you see, when I have been deceived, then it would be too late."

he said whimsically; and Lisa could not help laughing.

Now she went up to him and laid her hand on his breast.

"What have I done that you should mistrust me?" she asked. "Why can't you allow yourself to be happy?"

"Yes, you are right." He caressed the beautiful hand which rested close to his heart. "You are right; but it is this. I know that the young rarely love the old, and you are so young, so beautiful—supposing you grew to love some one else?"

"But who am I to love, since you kill everybody before I have even spoken to them almost?" He laughed.

"I had to kill Vremi," he said.

"Yes, I know; and perhaps you did right, but it is an awful thing to kill a man, you know." She spoke reproachfully.

"I shall kill every one—every one who comes between me and you; every one who tries to make you love them—every one," he said, and his words made her shiver. "Every one," he went on vehemently, "until——"

"Until what?" she asked him, as he broke off shortly.

"Until you come and tell me that you love them."



- "And then?" She smiled at him. "Then you will kill me."
  - "No; I will kill myself."
- "Ah!" She laughed. "I will never tell you, then."
- "Yes, yes; if I were sure that you would tell me, if you would promise, then I would behave better. It is always the doubt which kills me, which makes me restless, miserable."
  - "Is that it, really?"
- "Yes; if you would promise. . . . " He seated himself in an armchair. His wound was hurting him, but he would not let her see it.

And as he sat there, she passed her hands gently over his white locks.

- "Well, if I promise to tell you the first time that I really take a fancy to some one, will you promise to wait till then to be jealous?"
- "Yes, I promise—at least I will try. I will not fight any more duels."
- "No, you must not, because the next time, you know, you might be killed, and what should I do?"
- "Would you care? I don't believe you would, I have worn out your affection."
  - "Ah, there you are beginning again!"
  - "But you have not promised yet."
  - "Well, then, of course I promise."



A look of content passed over his face, and she spoke lightly. It was easy to promise, seeing that there was nobody else that she cared for, she thought. And as she stood there by his side, the butler threw open the door and announced:

"Il signor Conte Luigi."



# CHAPTER XIV

"ARSENIC, my dear Signora, arsenic in its purest form—enough to kill a dozen men—a horse, anything except perhaps our patient here."

The doctor was speaking to Donna Lisa, and the one he called "our patient" was the old Count—the old Count, whom apparently nothing could kill, who had a charmed life, and who lay in bed now seriously ill, but apparently with a fighting chance of life.

"Arsenic! But how on earth could he have got it, unless——" She hesitated as the thought crossed her mind that perhaps he had taken it himself; then another thought occurred to her—a thought so awful that she tried to put it from her, the while just the fact that it had hovered for a moment, gave an expression to her face which puzzled the doctor.

- "Unless what, Contessa?"
- "Unless he had done it himself."
- "That he would never do. I have known him for years, Contessa; I knew his father.



I was then quite a young man. I am sixty now, the Count is fifteen years older than I am, and my father knew his father, and so on; a Della Braccia never takes his own life, never;" and then he added: "He is too happy." His words and his look seemed to encompass Lisa, the villa, the old Count's wealth, life.

"I hope he is."

The tone of sincerity, mingled with doubt, struck the doctor. Was it possible that it was not as people said—that there was trouble, and that . . . No, he would not frame the thought, although he had seen some strange things in his day.

"But who could have given it to him? It must have been in his food. I give him his medicine myself; I do not allow even Carlo, who has been so many years with him, to give it."

"You mean the medicine I have prescribed lately?"

The doctor strove to make his voice impersonal. Fearful thoughts flitted backwards and forwards, and would not be denied.

"No; I mean also the medicine Dr Lanzi prescribed in Venice. Could the chemist have made a mistake?"

"It would be a grave mistake for Crespi to make; he is a good, careful chemist."



"Yet it seems incredible; and yet, how could it be, otherwise?"

"Oh, he does not like to say; but, of course, now, since this duel, for instance, there might be people anxious for revenge."

"But he has seen no one, no one but me, since he came from Venice."

"No one else?" The doctor looked up from the thermometer he had been examining.

"Except, of course, his son. Count Luigi left a day or two ago, but——"

"Hm!" The doctor said nothing but "Hm!"

"And he never came to his bedroom—at least not with my knowledge; and then, doctor, we must not let our imagination run away with us."

"No, you are right, Signora."

The thought, the awful thought, weakened. If she knew anything about this, she would have been inclined to let suspicion fall on somebody else. No, he considered himself a judge of character after all these years, with all his experience. No, that young woman, the young wife, the Contessina, she had not done this thing. If she had, then he would never believe in a face again, nor in his powers of discrimination. But Luigi! that was another thing. He had known Luigi since he was a child, and never liked him. He was



a sneak, and the old doctor detested a sneak. It went with biliousness, and in women with hysteria, and those kind of illnesses didn't interest him. What he enjoyed was an amputation—ah, that was a treat!—a surgical operation.

"No, we must not, as you say, begin imagining, for the imagination has no limits; even proofs are not always quite enough," he added, laughing. Now his tone was more friendly.

"I shall want to see those bottles—to take them away, to have them examined. I shall send them to Crespi to-day—no, perhaps not to Crespi. I shall take them to my own laboratory; then if it is Crespi, per Dio! Crespi will have grave trouble. He makes up all my prescriptions. I prefer to have them made in Venice; here in Cadore—well, they have not the experience."

"Of course you must take the bottles." She rose and fetched them. "And I entreat of you to have them well examined; spare no expense."

The old Count groaned, then made a movement.

The doctor went and leaned over him, and Lisa came up to the bed.

"How is he, doctor?" There was real anxiety in her voice and look.



The doctor felt his pulse.

"So, it is not so bad; but I will send a nurse."

The invalid shook his head.

"You don't want a nurse, eh? You have the Contessa, I know, but——"

"I assure you that it is no trouble to me; on the contrary——"

"Well, well, I will come back this evening, and then we will see."

He gave some directions, and Lisa followed him out of the room.

"Tell me, doctor, is there any hope?"

He looked at her gravely. To any other young wife, what he thought, would mean despair, but to the wife of such an old man he knew that it could only mean the death of a dear friend, a much loved friend. He who had seen the renewal of health which is almost like the renewal of spring, knew that in youth love springs again; or if it has never bloomed, blooms for the first time after a companionship such as hers had been with this old man, just as from decayed and half-dead branches, sometimes a young green tendril peeps forth for the first time. It would not kill her if he died, he thought, the while he had admired her quiet manner, her absence of exaggeration of grief.

"With any other man of his age, I should say emphatically none. With him it is



impossible to tell; but I cannot hide from you that coming after the wound in his side, it is very unlikely that he will recover."

When he had left her, she remained standing silent for an instant, the fingers of her two hands interlaced; then she went back to him and sat down quietly by his bed. He had sunk into a stupor again, and she sat and watched the dying man alone in the big villa. She had written to tell her mother that morning, and she expected her that evening, but before evening she had telegraphed to her not to come. After what the doctor had said to her, she wanted to be alone, and—yes, none of her own people must come here now.

At midnight he stirred, and she got up to give him his medicine, the new medicine which the doctor had prepared with his own hands, and which no one was to touch but herself.

The sick man followed her with his eyes as she flitted about, then he smiled to himself.

She held the spoon to his lips lovingly, coaxingly. In his weakness she felt all the old tenderness returning. What did it matter if he was jealous or not—he was the dearest old man, the most charming, and he loved her.

"Is there any in this?" he asked with that same weak but telling smile.

"Any what, dear?"



"Arsenic." It seemed to her as if he chuckled faintly.

"No, no, dear, of course not. It is a new bottle; Dr Villiardi has prepared it himself."

She placed the bottle on a little table close to the bed.

Then he turned his eyes on her.

"Why did you try to kill me?"

Evidently he was wandering in his mind, she said to herself.

"Try to kill you, dear? My one wish is to bring you back to life."

He sighed, and remained silent. Soon he had fallen into a stupor again, and as she sat on there till it grew dark, his words haunted her, frightened her. Was it possible that he thought that she had done this thing? Novels she had read lately to wile away the time, came back to her mind, stories she had heard.

"Good God!" she murmured. "Good God!" and covered her face with her hands. Yet as the darkness and the silence continued, her thoughts grew morbid. Yes, she could imagine that it would look like that. She alone here, and the quarrel with Vremi, the murder of Vremi, and then this, and no one to give his medicine but herself.

"Good God!" It was a trap, an awful

trap. She could see it now, understand it all. She could not be mistaken—oh no! there was no doubt. Now she could understand that strange conversation with Luigi one night, when he had asked her:

"Why did you make him kill Vremi? Is it possible that you really love my father?"

Then it had seemed a natural question the question of a friend of Vremi, who knew nothing of the details - the question of an unfilial son who hated his stepmother. here, this evening, she could imagine what he meant. It had been a feeler, an attempt to find out if she would assist him; and, failing in that, he had thought of this plan, this way of getting rid of his father, of avenging his friend's death, and of throwing the blame on to her. She remembered now that she had found Luigi in her husband's room one afternoon when she had gone there to fetch his glasses, and that he had made some excuse for being there. The incident had seemed of no importance at the time; now it seemed to her that it could only be he. The servantswhy should they poison him? Carlo had been with him for years, and had been a child in his service. He had cried his eyes nearly out, when his old master was wounded. Viola -what reason could she have, unless, indeed,

she thought to liberate her mistress; but she was a devout woman in her way, and harmless; she would not do such a thing, and the old Count was good to his servants. If he swore at them when he had the gout, afterwards he would say something pleasant, or give them a present of money. They knew that he only swore when he was in pain. No; none of the servants would have done it, and no one but herself and Luigi had been there. Oh, if only she had gone back to Venice when he wanted her to! If only she had never urged a reconciliation with his son! Yes, now-she almost screamed when she thought of it - now they might even say that she had urged the reconciliation in order to have an accomplice.

Then from sheer weariness she told herself that she was absurd, that she had taken the words of a man, whose mind was rambling, as if they were serious—that when he was better they would employ the police, they would find out.

But again and again her thoughts reverted to what he had said, to the ugly aspect of things, the tangle there might be; yes, even if she told her husband her suspicions, he might think that she wished to divert suspicion from herself. Oh, how unlucky she was! The



innocent are nearly always unlucky; it is to be hoped that there lies compensation in their own knowledge of their innocence.

At two o'clock the doctor came, bringing a nurse with him, and found her by her husband's bedside.

"I thought it was best to bring some one; you will be worn out. She will call you if he wakes. She knows what to do."

The thought flashed through Lisa's brain—did the doctor think her guilty, too? She felt like one accused of an awful crime before a jury, to whom she is powerless to prove her innocence.

- "He awakened once and took his medicine."
- "Did he speak?"
- "Yes." She hesitated a moment. She wondered if she ought to tell the doctor what he said. "He seemed to be rambling a little."

The doctor whispered to the nurse to go into the next room.

It was a relief to see another woman about the place, Lisa thought, and she had a kindly face; but if he talked like that before her.

. . . The feeling of impotence against fate was beginning to make her feel faint and ill.

"I have been to Crespi," he said. "He had the jar in which my prescription had been



made; he showed it to me, and I tested what was in it. There was no arsenic."

Her lips moved. She had an impulse to tell him what her husband had said, to implore him to sustain her; then the pride which dominated so many of her actions arose insistent, compelling silence. Instead she said:

"As soon as he is better, we must have the police here; we must find out who did it."

But later, when she was persuaded by the nurse to go and lie down, she gave way once more to despondency. The grey fingers of dawn, clutching at the window blinds when she went to bed, and the filmy mists stretching across the lawns when she pulled them aside for an instant to look out, seemed like presaging ghosts of misfortune stealing stealthily towards the house. She cast her eves towards the forest which hid the Norinis' place. If only she could tell him, tell some one who had known her as a child! but perhaps he, too, would not believe her, would think that, having sold herself, tired now of her bargain, she wanted to get rid of it. She was too weary even to cry, but it was long before she got to sleep. She was going over the whole of the time while Luigi had

been there—piecing the different little events together, the words he had let fall, his attitude towards herself, towards his father; and now everything looked suspicious. She went back in thought with weary brain-threshing, to the moment when the servant had thrown open the door and announced "Count Luigi." It had surprised them both his coming, his solicitude for his father.

"I went to see how you were. I called at the Palazzo three times, but it was like a fortress; then at last I saw the Marchesa, and she told me you had started for Le Cadore, that you were still very weak and ill." He had not mentioned the duel, nor had the old Count. Vremi had been Luigi's intimate friend. Later, as Lisa sat by his bedside, he had said to her:

"That fellow means no good by coming here. Vremi was his friend: if he were sincere he would take me to task about it."

Yes, even to Lisa it had seemed odd, his visit. He had never been to Le Cadore of late years, and the reconciliation had been of so feeble and sketchy a character, that it hardly justified his following it up by coming to see his father as if nothing had ever happened between them. Then in a day or two he had seemed to get on better with his father. Now



and then Lisa had heard them laughing; and once the old man said:

"I think it was a good thing, perhaps, that we made it up. I shall never trust him, but blood is thicker than water."

And one day-she remembered it now-she had found them talking earnestly together in a low voice, and when she came in they had stopped speaking. After that the old Count had been a little irritable with her, and had asked her if the Norinis were at the villa, if the son was at home; and she had said yes, and that she had met the son that afternoon. And she remembered now perfectly that father and son had exchanged glances. Then the incident had struck her, afterwards it had vanished again from her thoughts, now it returned and brought with it a new meaning. Yes, she was not far wrong in the surmises which seemed to flock in and out of her mind now, like birds in and out of a belfry, or like the pigeons of San Marco. Luigi had striven to poison his father's mind against Lisa. He had no particular grudge against her, he had even a vague feeling of gratitude for her having made up the quarrel; but he accused her of being the cause—direct or indirect, it didn't matter much-of his friend's death, and he wished to embitter his father's life.



had seen Lisa going towards the forest, and had followed her and seen her meet Norini, and told his father.

It had not been an arranged meeting, although, perhaps, she had had it in her mind that he might be there. She had run out for half an hour, leaving father and son together as much not to seem always to interfere with their conversation, as to breathe a little fresh air after the constant watching by the old Count's bedside. She had talked for a few brief moments with Leonardo: told him that her husband had arrived and was ill, and that she must hurry back, and he had walked back a few steps with her. There was nothing in the meeting itself, yet Lisa could see now, how it might be turned to her disadvantage; how Luigi, knowing his father's temperament, could weave a romance out of it; how, powerless as he was to follow her, the old Count would lie and chafe, thinking it all out, distorting the trivial incident into something dreadful. Ah, surely it had been an unlucky day when she had asked him to save the Giotto!

And now her thoughts followed on in painful, heart-rending sequence. Three days after Luigi had returned to Venice, and the same evening, his father had been taken seriously ill. To Lisa it all seemed clear as



daylight. The question was, would it ever be proved, and who was going to bear the brunt of it, she or Luigi?

Was it because she was so tired, so weary of it all, that something seemed to whisper: "It will be you—you"?

She slept late next morning and awoke with a start to find Viola by her bedside with a cup of chocolate, telling her that the doctor was there, and that the Signor Conte was better.

Lisa uttered a sigh of relief.



# CHAPTER XV

YES, the old Count was better; and Lisa was glad, thankful.

"That old man will never die," Dr Lanzi said to Norini—the older one—when he met him. "He has made a pact with the devil; or they are afraid of him even in purgatory. One week a duel, and he gets better; the next, he drinks enough poison to kill an ox, and in a few weeks he will be dancing at the carnival."

And Norini told his son Leonardo, who sighed, and looked so miserable that his father laughed.

"It is no good waiting any longer, Leonardo," he said; "you should have made more haste; now you had better look out for some one else. There is Maria della Marca—she is a pretty girl, and looks at you when she comes out of church as if you were a red apple with eyes. . . . Dio mio."

"Donna Lisa would never have married



me," the young man answered gloomily. "She is devoted to the old Count."

"Or his money," put in his father.

Yes, that was what worried Leonardo more than anything, the constant wonder of whether she had really loved the old Count, or if she had, as he had expressed it, sold herself, if she had fallen beneath his ideal of her. If she had not cared for him, then she was no longer the Lisa of his childhood: then even if the old man died, he would not want to marry her, even if she would. But she would not—no, he didn't think that she would ever care for him. He was beginning to think that she was cold.

But the fact of the old Count's getting better, and making rapid progress, did not lift the heavy clouds of mystery from Lisa's horizon. She was conscious of an imperceptible something between herself and her husband, which had not been there before. She could hardly have said what it was, and yet she knew that it existed. He was a little more exacting, a shade less tender, more irritable. But all this she put down to his illness. The nurse he had sent flying, the moment he was well enough to have his own way.

"If I tire you, if I am too much trouble," he said to her—"Carlo has always nursed me;



he knows what to do. What do I want with a woman about?"

"It was the doctor's wish, he brought her without consulting me. You know that there is nothing I would not do for you."

He gave a bitter little laugh.

"Perhaps it isn't for so long, eh?"

"I do not like you when you talk like that," she had said; but because she knew what was in his mind she found it difficult to say all she thought. She could imagine, with her sensitive nature, how it must sound to him; but she was only waiting till he was better to speak to him frankly, to ask him if he suspected her, and why.

And another thing puzzled her in his behaviour, or at least made her uncomfortable. He wouldn't put the matter in the hands of the police.

"No, no," he said every time she or the doctor suggested an investigation. "Whoever it is won't do it again. This time I shall be too sharp for them." Lisa felt the swift colour rise to her cheeks when he spoke like this.

"Yet I think you owe it to yourself and to everybody else," the doctor had said one day, holding his patient's wrist in one hand, his watch in the other, yet looking at Donna Lisa instead of the watch.



And when the doctor was gone she said to him:

"Yes, the doctor is right; you ought to find out who it was. How do we know—perhaps there is some one under this very roof who wishes us harm, who will try again."

"Or who wishes me harm—who wishes to free you."

"You are talking nonsense. If you are going to begin like that again, I shall leave the room."

"Tell me," he said, looking at her steadily.

"Do you really want me to get well? Do you want me to send for the police?"

And she, looking back at him steadily too, straight in the face, asked:

"Have I ever lied to you, caro?"

No, she had never lied to him, unless all her life was a lie, unless what others said was true.

"Yet," he went on, "the other day you said that you hated notoriety—that I had made you the talk of Venice with that duel."

And, holding her head straight, and looking at him with a look he had never seen on her face before, she said:

"You forget yourself, Della Braccia: this has nothing whatever to do with me."

And as if to add to the general confusion



and to her misery, a week later Luigi came to see his father, to stay, he said, for a few days.

She had begged the doctor to forbid his coming; and he, partly guessing the whole circumstances, had forbidden any one to enter the room but the servants and the Contessa. Once Luigi had come all the way from Venice, and the Count had sent word that he was too ill to see him. He had begged Lisa to go to him, but she had refused. If she saw him she would tell him what she thought, what she knew.

"I prefer not," she had told the Count; and he had wondered why she refused. But now there was no excuse to offer, and the Count himself seemed anxious to see him. He was progressing so rapidly, that already he could sit up in his chair for a few hours. If the weather had been finer, he might have sat on the terrace, the doctor said, and he would grow still stronger.

And it was on the morning of the day on which Luigi was expected that Lisa elected to speak to her husband. She had strange forebodings of evil, and she did not know to what extent he might poison his father's mind against her. She had come to the conclusion that it was her duty to warn her husband, and the tacit strain between them was killing her.



If he thought that she had done this thing, then let him tell her so and send for the police. She could not bear the position any longer, the evident doubt in his mind, and yet seeing him daily, being tender and kind, and knowing that he mistrusted her. He was well enough now to talk on almost any subject, and it was her right.

He had just finished reading Luigi's letter and laid it on the coverlet.

- "Perhaps, after all, I have been wrong. The boy is headstrong, but, after all, he seems anxious about me," he said with half-closed lids.
- "Caro, I have something to ask you," she said somewhat irrelevently, without answering him.
- "What is it, cara? You generally get your own way, though perhaps not always."
- "I want you to promise me that while your son is here you will let no one give you your medicine but me."

The old man opened his eyes and looked at her, watching her features narrowly.

- "Why, cara?"
- "Because, you see, the doctor has entrusted me with a bottle which he has prepared himself, and I am responsible for it. I do not want Carlo or any one, not even your son, to touch it."

The Count was silent for a few moments, then he raised himself on his elbow.

- "Do you suspect-" He broke off.
- "Yes; I have my suspicions. I want to prove them."

The old Count sank back on his pillow. Was she innocent, or was she trying to place the blame on Luigi? At one moment he himself had thought of Luigi, wondered if it was his way of avenging Vremi's death. Then Luigi's subtle tongue had worked its poison like the fangs of a dangerous snake.

- "If only I could get out, get about!" he murmured; but the significance of his words failed to be grasped by Lisa. Presently he turned and looked at her.
  - "How can you prove them?"
- "In this way. I will give you your medicine at night, the last thing, then I will place it by your bed. If——" She hesitated. "If any one offers it you, you will refuse, then in the morning you will give it yourself to the doctor; and if——" She broke off again. "If there is anything in it, you will know that it is the person who offered it you in the night. It will not hurt now to go without it in the night."
- "Yes, I will do that." The old Count's eyes glistened. What a relief it would be! Yet the very fact that she had thought it all out



made him suspicious. "Why are you so anxious to know?"

"Why, of course I am anxious to know. If it is as I suspect, then——" She laid her head on the bed and burst into tears. "Then, caro, you will not think it is I. Oh, how can you, how can you!"

And her tears seemed so sincere, that the old Count felt ashamed.

"Ah, cara, I don't think it is you—not really; but it seems so strange that you should love me, you who are so young and beautiful. I cannot believe in my good fortune."

And when Luigi arrived he found her quite bright. It seemed to her as if, after all, she had grown a little closer to the truth, convinced her husband a little bit.

They all dined together in a bright little sitting-room giving out of the Count's bedroom. It led on to the terrace, and often last summer they had breakfasted out there, he and she. She was thinking of that time to-night, and there was a wistful look in her eyes. She had sometimes felt weary then, but at least there had been no tragedy, and she quoted Dante's lines to herself:

"Nessun m aggior dolor, che ricordarsi del tempo felice, nella miseria."

Yes, it seemed a tembo felice, a happy time,



as compared with to-day. And after dinner she left the men to smoke, and went down to the drawing-room to play the piano. But the first notes made her miserable. She felt so alone, so alone; even her mother she had not allowed to come. She was so clever, so level-headed; if they were to find out this thing, it must be between him and her alone. The fight was now till death between her and Luigi. She hated herself for having ever been civil to him.

And when the two men were alone, Luigi, lowering his voice, began:

"Have you found out anything?"

"No; what can I do here in bed alone?"

"You have no suspicions." As he spoke Luigi lighted a cigar at the wax candle on the table.

"Yes, I have suspicions, but——" The old Count flicked a crumb from the table. "Well, we shall see," went on the old Count; "I have a means of knowing."

Luigi uttered an oath as his cigar went out, and the old Count looked up and laughed. Their eyes met, but the old Count's were not sharp enough nowadays, to see the look of fear in those of Luigi, yet something in his son's attitude suggested something, he could not tell quite what.

"I think, all the same, that perhaps you are



right: it would be better to alter one or two things in my will."

Now a gleam of joy shot through Luigi's eyes.

"Of course, you quite understand that I did not mean the suggestion with any regard to myself—merely as a safeguard."

"Oh, of course not." The old Count spoke with sarcasm.

"Ah, you are thinking of old times, but I have changed. When one marries a good woman, you know, padre mio, when one settles down, one thinks differently about many things; and of course you and I won't agree about that. These daughters of the middle class, of the people—of merchants, if you will—they are so much more simple, so true, and straight, and honest."

"Yes, I have heard that," said the old Count musingly. He wasn't thinking about what his son was saying. "How is it that you have no children, eh?" asked his father; he always liked to say something disagreeable to his son if he could—he simply couldn't help it.

"Well, we have been married three years—we may yet have some."

Never had Luigi so desired a son as to-night, when, if he could have aroused interest in a grandson, he might have obtained



from his father some admission of what arrangement he was going to make in the new will.

At ten o'clock Lisa came to try and persuade the old Count to go to bed.

"Ah, my gaoler is here," said the Count, laughing; and as he walked to the door, leaning on Lisa's arm, Luigi's eyes followed her with a malevolent look—a look in which many expressions were mingled, but in which those of anxiety and secret triumph dominated.

But the next morning the test failed. The medicine had remained untouched.

"He will not run the risk at once, the first day of his arrival," Lisa thought; but so far as the old Count was concerned, the situation remained unchanged. It seemed as if he could not bring himself to believe in Lisa's guilt, yet also as if the doubt in her had established a sensation of want of stability, in the midst of which he turned instinctively to his own flesh and blood.

And at twelve o'clock the lawyer arrived, and was closeted with the old Count for quite an hour. He had refused to have any one present, although Luigi had expected to be called. Lisa was glad to get an hour's rest, but Luigi wandered about the house aimlessly, not daring to leave it lest he be summoned.



Once he wandered into Lisa's boudoir, not knowing that she was there fast asleep. For one moment Luigi bent over her, and she awoke to meet his eyes fixed on her with an evil expression, and she was seized with terror. She sprang to her feet and uttered a cry. On her lips were the words: "Are you planning to murder me, too?" Instead she drew a cape around her shoulders and left the room. She could not bear to be alone with him.

The lawyer stayed to luncheon, but the day wore on without the Count telling Lisa or his son what he had done. Luigi was eaten up with curiosity which he could hardly disguise, but to Lisa it was a matter of complete indifference. She felt pretty sure that he had altered his will, but if she had thought of the pecuniary position at all, she would have been more than satisfied with the half he had settled upon her before her marriage. As it was, however, she was weary of wealth. It had brought her no happiness, it seemed to her.

"You do not seem to care to know what I have done to-day with the lawyer," the Count said once. "Later I will tell you."

"Oh no, I do not care; I only want one thing, to get at the bottom of the mystery."



At three the lawyer had left, and Lisa went out for a short walk round the garden and returned, then she read the daily paper to the Count. Presently he dozed off.

At six o'clock Luigi went upstairs to see his father, and Lisa slid downstairs with the medicine bottle in her pocket.

Half an hour later the butler announced: "Signor Leonardo Norini."

He had come to say good-bye; he was going back to Vienna, he could not bear his home any longer.

"To Vienna!" As she bade him be seated, it seemed to Lisa that her luck was indeed deserting her, since in the hour of her greatest need he left. She realised now that what had kept her from despair had been the thought that her childhood's friend was near, that in the hour of crisis, if she needed him, he would be close; while he wondered why she looked so pale, whether she cared if he went or stayed. And tentatively he remarked:

"You are not looking well."

His words brought her to herself. She had just been saying to herself: "Now what does it matter if we go back to Venice or not?"

But when he spoke of her health she recovered herself.



"I have been so anxious, you know; he has been dangerously ill."

"Yes; we heard that he was poisoned, or something of the sort."

And innocently she told him the whole story. Norini had heard it; he had heard a good deal, too, of the stories that had been going around. Some said that she had done it. Others, that it was Luigi; but the doctor, who was the older Norini's friend, was a staunch ally of the woman's. Leonardo wondered if he should tell her what he had heard. No, to tell her would be an insult.

They talked for nearly an hour. The clock struck half-past six.

He got up to go. It was dark now in the drawing-room. The servants had not yet come to light the lamps. The old Count would not have gas or electric light.

For a second it seemed to Lisa as if she could not let him go, as if she must cry out: "You must not leave me—I am in danger; stay, stay till all is over!" Instead, she found herself repeating almost coldly:

"Well, we will meet again, no doubt."

"Perhaps." He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it fervently. Then, as they both stood there in the evening glow, the



door opened, and the old Count stood in the doorway with Luigi beside him.

But this time Lisa did not care.

"Good-bye, dear Leonardo," she said suddenly with the caressing voice of former days, when they had been friends and playmates. "Good-bye, and write often, and come back soon."



# · CHAPTER XVI

Two days later Donna Lisa was back at her parents' house in Venice, and the past seemed like a fearful, confused dream, or like a hallucination of fever or madness, in which the earlier past alone, stood out stable and sane. To-day, back in the home of her childhood, her mind reverted almost with fondness to the episode of the purple frock.

Everything, it seemed to her, was over; and the Giotto Madonna, still smiling from the wall on to the canal, seemed as if it had mocked her.

The events of the last two days had been so precipitate, so painful, that Donna Lisa had hardly known what actuated her in her sudden determination to leave Le Cadore, to go away, to seek her parents. She only knew that she could not bear it any longer, that the strain was too much, and that the old Count had hurt her pride beyond forgiveness.

He had said nothing while Luigi was by, but afterwards they had had a scene—a terrible



scene it seemed to her, but in which neither had raised their voice or said vulgar things, as is the way with people often when they grow angry. Perhaps because of the dignity of Lisa, and the calm, cold, cutting civility of the old Count's tone, the scene held in it something more incisive, more terrible. He had asked her how she dared meet her lover beneath his roof, how she dared let him kiss her hand; and she, not knowing all the subtle work of Luigi, how he had worked on the old man's imagination, had resented his tone, and for the first time told him that she would no longer put up with his treatment of her.

"You are really absurd—childish," she said to him. "Do you imagine that because of your jealousy I am going to forego bidding farewell to an old friend, before he goes on a journey?"

And the old Count, beside himself, had exclaimed:

"Ah, he sees that it is no good waiting any longer; they can't kill me with poison, so it is no good his waiting, eh?"

For the first time exasperated, she had felt as if her love had been killed, her affectionate love for the old man. She could not bear it any longer, while for the first time in her life she allowed a thought to run



riot which hitherto she had always repressed, forbidden to enter her mind: the thought of how different her life might have been if she had married Leonardo.

And the events of that night had seemed to emphasise rather than smooth over the ruffled feelings of pain and wounded pride which had taken complete possession of her.

That evening she had not appeared at dinner. It would, she knew, give them an opportunity to discuss her deed, if her husband could bring himself to descend to discussing her with his son. It would enable Luigi to put in his little poisoned arrows of suggestion, which she suspected him strongly of doing; but to-night she no longer cared. She was broken, worn out. She had the sense of failure, and the feeling of inability to cope with life. The fact that the old Count had discovered the mystery had lost its charm. Nothing seemed to matter now. He had spoken to her in a way she could never stand again. This time she would not forgive.

And while they were dining on the terrace, she had made her plans quickly, rapidly, feverishly, giving Viola curt orders, commanding secrecy, but without taking her into her confidence. Viola was mystified. A hundred rumours had gone about amongst the servants



and the peasantry, for the Italians are a gossipy people, yet perhaps not ill-naturedly so. There is at least no puritanic want of charity amongst them, and of one thing Viola was certain. If there was any trouble of a serious character, it had been introduced by the son. The servants all hated Luigi, as they adored Lisa, and already several petty changes in the house they put down to his influence.

And now, lying on the sofa in her mother's room, looking pale and wan, she told herself that she could not have done otherwise than come away. But her mother was distressed beyond measure. It had all seemed to be going so smoothly till that fatal night when Vremi had disguised himself as a gondolier, and now suddenly, it seemed as if their old ill luck had returned. "I can't understand it," her mother had said more than once; "I can't understand it. He always seemed such a charming old man."

Yes, he was charming, Lisa told herself with that keen sense of justice which was one of her great qualities. He was charming when he was not blinded by jealousy, but how hard, how cruel it was, that just because he was so jealous, when she had resolved to lead such a quiet life for his sake, one thing after the



other, with which she had nothing to do, should arise to awaken that jealousy.

That she had been cleared of his suspicions about the poisoning seemed now a minor event in the face of the decisions which she felt called upon to make. Of his money she didn't think at all: better the last degree of poverty than all this, better to go and work with her hands in the fields, than be the object of perpetual jealousy and suspicion.

And every now and then the scenes, the emotion of the past night came back to her, realistic, terrible, and she told herself that she could not live through it all again. Perhaps it was cruel to leave him at such a moment, but once her innocence proved, it had seemed to her as if something had snapped, the machinery of her being given away; flight and rest—those were what her heart and soul and body craved for, after that she would be able to think more clearly.

Yes, Lisa's test had proved the case, just at the moment when she had ceased to think that it mattered whether she was proved innocent or not. It would all begin again some day. In his insane jealousy he would never trust her, and always he would grow jealous again and again.

On the evening of the day on which



Leonardo had come to say good-bye, after she had made her preparations for departure on the following morning, enjoining secrecy to Viola, who, fully persuaded that Donna Lisa was going to meet Leonardo somewhere, yet intended to stick by her mistress (she would not be sorry for a little excitement, existence had been rather slow of late, and absence from Venice during the winter had been worse than a penance—"a penance, at least you know when that will come to an end," she had said to herself, "but to stay at Le Cadore like this, from day to day, from week to week, without knowing what is coming next, that is what I never expected.") Lisa had seated herself at her writing-table and written a long letter to her husband, explaining her reasons for going.

"I cannot bear the life," she wrote. "I have done everything that a woman can do, but you will not allow yourself or me to be happy. I cannot live this life any longer, and I am going away. If you are disappointed in me, I am sorry; I have tried to do my best, and I have been sincerely fond of you, but if this went on much longer I should go mad, or you would drive me to the very extremes which you now dread. If you are ever ill and need me I will come to you. As for your money, I do not want it; it has brought



me sorrow and shame, although, God knows, I did not marry you on account of it. I shall often think of you and pray for your happiness. Most of all I shall pray God to help you to conquer that demon of jealousy which is destroying your life, and which has broken my heart."

At one o'clock the next morning she laid the letter on the chimney-piece in a prominent place. At half-past nine that night she heard them come into his room from the dining-room, and she rose and locked her door softly. A few minutes later Viola brought her a little supper on a tray, and a glass of wine, then she undressed and sat for an hour by the fire, her face in her hand, leaning her elbow on the arm of the chair.

Through the thick walls and double doors she could hear the murmur of voices, the voices of father and son who had seemed to have forgotten her, and a great bitterness invaded her being. What had she done to be suspected like this, to have her life destroyed by suspicions?

Why did life invent such torments for her who had always tried to do what was best? She had been a child when she married Della Braccia, now in a few short months she had become a woman—and a sad woman, grave,



given to meditations. Ah! it was true that winter should not mate with spring; yet if he had only been different they might have been happy, since she cared for no one else, and gladly sacrificed her life, or at least so much of it as would gladden his declining years.

To-night the loneliness was almost more than she could bear, even it seemed to her that they were happier when he was scolding her so long as they were alone, but this new pleasure in his son's society wounded her, this son whom he had told her he detested, despised, who had caused him trouble all his life, insulted him, and whom she was certain, had attempted to take his father's life. Was it possible that this was the devil's own world, and that only those who did his business, who were wicked, prospered? It looked remarkably like it.

And her thoughts wandered on till they rested for a moment on Leonardo—Leonardo, whose kiss seemed to linger still between her fingers, and who was travelling to-night forward to the work of life, with no love to cheer him. After all, the Madonna had not advised her so well. With the new perceptions which had come to her with experience, it seemed to her that she had made a sorry hash of life.

And always scrupulous and conscientious,



she asked herself if she were doing wrong to go? No; if her father and mother knew, they would not blame her. She did not think the Cardinal himself would blame her. She did not want to make a fuss or a scandal. She saw just how it was: he was in all respects a charming old man, generous, chivalrous, only he was possessed of a demon of jealousy, and now he was too old to change, and she could not stand it. She was quite sure that he loved her, and that he would miss her.

What she hoped was, that Luigi would not do him any harm, but Carlo would look after him. Later, if anything happened between him and his son, when he was tired of him again, she would perhaps return when she felt better, more able to bear it all. It was midnight when she went to bed, and, weary in mind and body, she fell asleep.

At one o'clock she woke with a start, and it seemed to her that she had been awakened by a noise. The moon was shining brightly in at the window, and she sat up and listened. Had he called her, was he ill? She glanced at the clock, but could not make out the hour. She had left the medicine in his room by his bedside. He did not take it at night now.

Yes, she could hear the boards creaking faintly in the next room. She rose and slipped



on her dressing-gown and tossed her fair hair off her forehead. Very softly she unlocked her door. There was a small space between the double doors, and she stood there an instant listening. If she had been mistaken she would wake him. Very slowly she opened the door. The old Count slept in a large, carved, canopied bed, and the curtains prevented her seeing him and the corner of that room, but by the faint glow of the night lamp, which since his illness had been left burning, she saw a shadow on the opposite wall—the shadow of a man in evening dress.

Her blood ran cold, and she drew back a little. What was he doing here in his father's room at this hour? Oh, if only she could see what was going on behind the curtain!

Now the figure, which had been advancing, turned its back on her, and a hand took up the bottle by the bed, then drew out the cork.

Slowly, stealthily, her heart in her mouth, she crept to the other side of the bed. Even if Luigi were putting something into the bottle, unless Della Braccia saw it with his own eyes, he would not believe. If she could only awaken him softly! With catlike movements she drew aside the soft silk curtain, then she almost uttered a cry—a cry of pleasure. The good God had not forgotten her!



Della Braccia was awake, awake and motionless, watching his son; and, as she approached, he raised his finger to his lip.

But the faint sound he made in turning towards her attracted Luigi's attention. He turned suddenly and found the eyes of the two fixed upon him. He turned a ghastly white.

"Ah," he said to Lisa, "you have come to give him his medicine. I thought as you were not at dinner, perhaps that——"

Lisa stood by the bed transfixed, her eyes fixed on the younger man, while one hand, a cold, slim hand, nervous, stretched across the coverlet, reaching for her husband's.

It was the old Count who broke the silence, the strange, nervous silence, which to Luigi held something ominous in it.

"It was very thoughtful of you," he said, "but—— Perhaps you would prefer to give it," he said, turning to Lisa.

Lisa's lips moved, but she simply could not speak. Her heart was full of thankfulness, and yet there was something horrible in being here, in this room, with a would-be murderer, and the old man defenceless, lying in his bed—she, a woman, the only witness of the scene.

But it was as usual the old Count who saved the situation. How wonderful he was!



she thought, so quick of resource, so brightly intelligent.

"I am not feeling well," he said; "ring for Carlo, cara, please."

And as Lisa moved towards the bell:

"Sit down, Luigi, sit down; I have something to tell you."

Mystified, Luigi sank on to a chair. There was something so strange in their manner: was it possible that this woman had been in the room all the time? No; he had looked in every corner to be certain, he had tried her door and found it locked. It was the noise he had made in trying it which had awakened her. No, she must just have entered. She could not have seen what he was doing; he had placed himself between the old man and the light. He had forgotten the shadow on the wall, the tell-tale shadow.

And Carlo appeared, looking startled, as if he feared that his master was dead.

The old Count raised himself on his pillow. His eyes were sparkling, he looked well and strong.

"Carlo, you will wake up everybody, and you will send for Dr Lanzi."

The man, mystified, disappeared to carry out the Count's order.

Luigi rose from his chair.



"You—you are——" It seemed as if speech had deserted him. "I think, if you do not want me, that I——"

"No, no; sit down, Luigi, sit down. I have something I want to tell you that will interest you. You, too, Lisa, must hear it; sit down, cara."

His voice was very tender as he turned to her, and his eyes seemed to entreat for pardon.

But Lisa did not sit down, instead, she stood by the bedside watching with strange fascination the face of her stepson, wondering what her husband was going to say.

Here and there in the house one could hear Carlo's voice bearing his master's message, a door opening and steps crossing corridors. The sounds brought a welcome relief from tension to Lisa's ears, but to the man, the would-be parricide, they seemed full of ill omen. Was he in a trap? Instinctively his hand sought the inside of his coat. If needs be he would defend himself or kill himself. They would not take a Della Braccia prisoner. Presently he seemed to gain fresh courage.

"Well, padre, what is all this—what is this wonderfully interesting piece of news?"

"Simply this, Luigi. You know all that poisoning—that arsenic that was found in my medicine bottles?"



Luigi looked up, and his eyes dilated with unspeakable terror.

"Well," the old Count went on, "it is a singular thing, but, without the police, without the slightest trouble, I have found who it was: the poisoner—or rather the would-be poisoner—is here, in this house."

The calm way in which he said this made Lisa's blood run cold. She wished they had kept Carlo in the room.

Luigi's eyes were terrible to look at. He was beginning to understand.

"Really, that is very interesting." He rose from his chair, and Lisa watched his every movement; and as he came slowly forward, she, with her eyes fixed on him, glided to the side of the bed.

The old man, seeing what she was about to do, stretched his hand to grasp the bottle.

The younger man made a dart forward. If only he could get hold of it, take it away, and then escape, all evidence of their tale would be wanting.

" No."

It was Lisa who spoke, and her voice rang out harsh, discordant, from fear and nervousness. A shot rang out, and Lisa threw herself in front of the old man; but it had been fired



by too unsteady a hand to do any harm, the bullet lodged in the opposite wall.

The old Count's hand trembled as he clutched the little bottle, and before the smoke from the pistol had cleared, the door opened and the doctor stood in the doorway. Carlo had found him easily, because he had been at the Norinis' attending Leonardo's mother, who was an invalid, and who had been taken seriously ill. Behind the doctor was a group of terrified servants who had heard the shot.

"Caught, per Dio!" said Luigi, as he cast an evil look on Lisa, a look which seemed to say: "You shall pay for this."

But now the old Count had regained his calm.

"Doctor," he said, "I am sorry to trouble you at this hour."

The doctor burst into a hearty laugh.

"Well, of all the extraordinary men! I hurried here, left that poor woman, thinking to find you with a priest by your side, and you look ten years younger." His eyes turned from Luigi to Lisa, and then travelled back again to the Count. Carlo came in and stood watching, closing the door after him, and Luigi gave a hasty glance at the window.

But escape from there was impossible.

"Doctor"—the old Count handed the bottle



to the doctor—"can you tell me if there is anything in this which you did not order to be put there?" The old man laughed.

The old doctor smelt the bottle.

"It is difficult without testing it properly, but——" He looked from one to the other.

"Well, I will tell you," said the Count.

"There is arsenic in it; and we have found the person who put it there. He is here."

He pointed to his son.



## CHAPTER XVII

But notwithstanding that all suspicions had been removed from her, Lisa went to Venice the next day.

There was nothing now to fear from Luigi. His father had told him to go, and with instinctive obsequiousness, with the habit of years, and because he was his master's son, Carlo had held the door open for him as he had passed out, breathing inwardly hate and vengeance on his father, on Lisa, but knowing that there was nothing left for him to do but to leave Venice for ever. He and his father would never meet again in this world.

The doctor had stayed late, listening to the old Count's recital of how he had not been able to sleep, and heard some one creep into his room, and lay silent and watched.

"Ah, that is just like you," the doctor had said with a chuckle.

How he had seen his son come in and search the room, moving on tiptoe, and then take up the bottle and put some white powder

into it; how Donna Lisa had come in hearing a noise, and how they had surprised him when he turned round.

"He didn't expect to find us both awake, eh, cara?"

Every moment he addressed Lisa with a renewed tenderness which was like the old days, but which failed to bring the old response. He had killed her love; and, although she had sprung instinctively forward to save him, although from a sense of duty, because once she had loved him, she would, if necessary, give her life for him, she could never love him again in the old way—never. It was no use trying.

And because he was excited, and would not sleep, the doctor gave him a sleeping draught. It was she, Lisa, who suggested it. She knew otherwise what would happen. He would ask her again to forgive him, entreat her not to go, and then in a few days all would begin over again. He had pained her too much; and now that there was no danger from Luigi she would leave him, if only for a time. He would think things over, and then perhaps one day she would try again, but not now.

And the sleeping draught had made the Count sleep for a few hours, then he had



awakened and remembered—remembered how she had tried to stop Luigi's seizing the bottle, and then when exasperated in the fury of the moment he had fired off his weapon; how she had thrown herself in front of him. He was a wicked, wicked old man; he did not deserve such a wife; ah, what could he do to make her forgive him?

He knew why she had stayed away from dinner; he knew that he had pained her beyond forgiveness, and yet she had come at the slightest sound from his room. Ah, she was good—a saint!

And he knew that to-night she had gone back to her room, not only because she was tired, but because for all the excitement, for all that he had discovered who it was who had tried to poison him, for all his tenderness, she had not forgiven. Would she ever forgive him? He thought not, and at the thought the tears rolled down his poor withered cheeks.

If she could have seen them, perhaps Lisa would have relented.

But just at the hour when the old man had fallen into a doze again, Lisa had slipped away, gone without bidding him good-bye, lest her courage fail her, or lest she awake him, slipped down the stairs at dawn with



Viola following her, got into the carriage at the gate, and driven to the station.

Already the cool air was beginning to revive her spirits. Here at last was freedom. She never even looked back at the house where she had been so unhappy; and at nine o'clock, when he asked if the Contessa was awake, they brought him her letter, the letter she had written before the affair with his son.

"I must go to Venice to-day," he had told Carlo; but when he tried to dress, he found that he was too feeble. The doctor came and told him that it would kill him to do the journey; and to the doctor, to his old and trusted friend, he told the story of his jealousy, of what had passed.

"You have known me for years, Lanzi—you know what I am when I am jealous."

"Yes; and if you were younger I would ——" The doctor broke off.

"You would horsewhip me, eh?"

The old Count smiled a sad, bitter smile. Duels had not killed him, nor, as the doctor put it, "enough poison to kill an ox" had not had their effect, but if Donna Lisa did not come back, he would give way at last.

And, because he saw his condition and pitied him, to comfort him the good doctor



promised to go and fetch her, and he started for Venice that night.

The old Count had never in his life felt so miserable. The whole day he sat in his armchair without speaking; and when the evening drew in, he was still sitting there wondering what he should do, how he could bear this silence, this loneliness.

His son's attempt to kill him, that he hardly ever gave a thought to. He had always known that Luigi had an evil disposition, had always mistrusted him, been against the reconciliation; and these few days of intercourse with him had only proved to himself, to the world, how right he had been. He did not think that his son would ever trouble him again. If he did, he would hand him over to the police; but Lisa's departure—that was awful, awful! All the sunlight seemed to have departed from the house, and he missed the sound of her footsteps, and the swish of her skirts more than he could express. And as he sat there, strange thoughts came to him, came and went-sometimes thrust aside, sometimes making place themselves for others: moments of sweetness, when he remembered how tender, how bright she had always been; and awful moments of remorse, when he recalled his suspicions—the way he had spoken to her about Vremi, about



Leonardo; and always a steady, persistent thought shaping itself slowly but certainly—a thought magnificent in outline, and which must inevitably bear fruit at last.

And, as she had thought would happen, his mind grew calmer and more rational, and he began to see things more clearly. Of course to a young girl like that, it was an awful life, without young people about her. Now, if she would come back, he would let her have the house full of people, do as she liked; and if she fell in love with some young man—well, that too he would try and bear. They would not have so long to wait. They said that he had a charmed life, but, after all, he was not going to live for ever.

He was glad that he had not altered his will. He could not have said what had kept him back from doing it. He had been silent, for he had wanted to puzzle them both—Luigi and Lisa; and yet he had done nothing, only discussed some matters of minor importance with the attorney, and told him that as they would not go back to Venice that winter, he could let the house if they had a good offer. But no children and no dogs he had said. His beautiful Palazzo must have good tenants. And the lawyer had gone away mystified.

How could a young woman like that stand



the solitude of Le Cadore, a summer place, in the winter alone, with this old man? And, knowing him well, he wondered if it was jealousy again which made him keep her penned up here.

Now Della Braccia was certain that Vremi had lied—that she had never made any assignation with him.

He was the worthy friend of Luigi, he said to himself.

And that night he slept badly; he missed Lisa, and the doctor had promised to come back, and bring the Contessa with him.

But it was late the next day before he returned, and when he did, he came alone. He had not known Lisa's mood, or he would have known that his task was impossible—at all events at present.

Later, perhaps, she had said; but more than this she would not promise.

"When can I start for Venice?" the old man had asked him.

It seemed to him that if he could see her, tell her how he needed her, how old and feeble he was now, that she would pity, she would come back. She had such a tender, good heart—she was so good, so good.

There were tears in the old man's eyes as he pleaded with the doctor. But the doctor

had spent several hours with her, and he knew that it was useless, that she would not see him just now.

"What has happened?" she had asked, when he walked into the library of the Palazzo di Val Moreno.

It seemed to her as if the doctor would only have come if he were dead or dying; and she asked herself if she would have the courage to go back, if that were the case. She had grown harder. He had tried her too far; something seemed broken within her which had helped her till now to bear, to be cheerful. Now it seemed to have suddenly disappeared.

"Ah no—I cannot go back, not yet; and tell him not to come. I do not want to see him yet—not yet."

"It will kill him if I go back without you." And she, remembering all that he had gone through, smiled a little.

"Ah no, it will not kill him. I must be alone. Tell him that I must be alone. Tell him," she went on, "that if he comes to Venice they will begin to make a fuss about the duel."

The doctor laughed.

"That will not keep him. If I told him that, he would come at once; besides, they will not do anything to him; he is too powerful in Venice, and then—"



He could not tell her that they would say that there was provocation, that to keep her name out of the papers the authorities would listen to the arguments of such two prominent members of society as the Marchese and the old Count, besides Vremi being in bad repute in Venice.

"Yet Vremi had friends, perhaps, who might wish to do him ill."

She spoke as always, solicitously for his welfare, but the old tenderness had gone.

"Tell him," she had said at last, "that if he comes, if he does not leave me alone, I will go away, quite away, far away, somewhere."

And the doctor, who was also the Di Val Morenos' doctor at Le Cadore, had talked long with her mother.

- "Ah, if we could only change it! It is awful, awful!" said the Marchesa. "And I who thought that all was going so well, that she was happy!"
- "Yes; and it would be all right, if it were not for that devil of a jealousy. He cannot help it, he was always like that."
- "And to think that we had no idea!" murmured the Marchesa.
- "You had no idea, because he had no young and beautiful wife." The doctor laughed.
- "If you could only persuade her to have patience—tell her that it is not for long."

"I told her, but that made her angry. She says that it is a wicked thing to sit there with him, and to feel that she is waiting, longing for his death."

"Ah! some people are too good, you know," put in the doctor with a touch of good-natured scorn.

And up to the last Donna Lisa had refused to go back—refused to promise ever to go back.

"I cannot trust him," she said in answer to all the doctor's arguments. "He has promised so often, and I have tried so often, and always it begins again."

And the doctor had been obliged to go back to his patient.

All she would promise to do was to write in a few days, to tell him what she would do, if she would go back.

"But if he comes I will not see him—I will not write even."

It was in vain to try and persuade her. She had reached the limits of a patience which had seemed infinite, she could not go beyond; and the fact that he had lately been ill did not move her.

"I feel sorry, very sorry, mama," she told her mother, "but I know just how it will be. If I go back because he has been ill, then I will never be able to get away again."



And the doctor did not know how to explain to the old Count that she would not return. He seemed dazed when the doctor came back without her.

"I must go to Venice," he went on repeating, and the doctor was at his wits' end.

"If you take my advice you will not go," he told him. "Women are like that: the moment you agree to their whims, they change their minds."

And for a few days the old man tried to possess his soul in patience, occupying most of the time writing her letters full of penitence and full of promises, if she would only come back.

Presently he went to Venice and spent the night at the hotel, and tried to see her; but she would not see him.

"Tell him"—she told her mother to take the message—"that if he comes here, then I will never go back. If he leaves me in peace, perhaps I will one day." And the poor old man had gone back to Le Cadore.

"Soon all Venice will be talking about it," her mother told her in despair. But Donna Lisa had ceased to care for what Venice talked about.

And, like a wilful child, she rejoiced in her freedom. It was good to go on the canal alone—not to be followed about, not always to



be thinking of what one should say, or what one should hold back.

And one day she went to the Palazzo Braccia to fetch some books and music. She had been prompted by an instinct she could not have fathomed, the instinct to try and revive some of the old enjoyment she had felt when she had first become mistress of the beautiful Palazzo, when he had been kind, and before the Vremi episode. Yes, she had been happy at the Palazzo, brief as their sojourn there had been; and trying, as she always did, to do right, she asked herself whether, if they met again here, instead of at Le Cadore, she could put up with it all again.

But to her amazement a new servant opened the door, and there were all the signs of the house being inhabited.

The house was let, the servant said, not knowing who she was; and with a feeling of homelessness she got into the gondola again. The glimpse of the interior saddened her. If she had not been afraid of meeting strangers she would have liked to wander over it again; and the sight of the mosaic which paved the hall gave her a momentary feeling of pain. It was there that she had stood that night and told her husband to dismiss the gondolier.



She remembered now that he had told her that he thought it would be better to let the house. With all those pictures he was afraid of damp, of fire, of robberies; it would be safer. And the agents had written him that they had a good offer from an American, from a Count Bevington and his daughter. It was the same American who last year wanted to buy the Giotto. And as Lisa looked up at the windows she saw a strange sight. Long ribands of lilac colour were floating from the balcony of the second floor, tied to a large bunch of violets.

"Is it a festa?" she asked the gondolier; but he only laughed.

"No, it is the Signorina who does that; she ties a different riband every day."

And as Lisa smiled at the strange whim, he went on:

"She is funny, too: she goes out alone in the evening on the canal late, late, and sings all by herself."

And Lisa wondered whether it was pleasant being out on the canal at night alone, and who this girl was.

And the gondolier, seeing that she was amused, told her of the man staying at the hotel, un gran pittore, who sometimes followed her.



"She certainly isn't married to an old man," she said to herself with grim humour. And once or twice through the day she thought of the flowing ribands, and wondered why the girl tied them there; and for a week it amused her to go and see every day what colour there was on the balcony. Sometimes, once or twice, she passed two days running, and saw the same riband and no flowers.

"She must be ill," she said to herself; and for no reason at all she began to take an interest in the girl who tied the ribands, and who was living in their house—perhaps sleeping in her room—who could tell? in her bed. And what she did not know was that all this time she was cheating herself, trying to tell herself that what she wanted was time to think, when all the time she was trying not to think—not to think of the one thing which she had promised herself never to think about, which she had promised her husband to confess to him, if it ever came to pass.

"Yet I was mistaken once," she said to herself. Was she making a mistake again? But there is no mistake, Donna Lisa, this time—no mistake in those long reveries which you want unbroken, undisturbed.

Yes, gradually, because she always ended



by seeing things straightforwardly and clearly, she could no longer disguise from herself that her thoughts were always with Leonardo, that she longed, pined, to see him.

It was wrong, dreadfully wrong, she told herself; then, trying to excuse herself, she would say that she had never thought of him till Della Braccia had sent her away to Le Cadore. She did not yet know that she had always loved him, but that till he went away that day, till he kissed her hand, she had not known what love was. Now it made her hard, cruel to every one else; and yet he had never told her that he loved her since her wedding morning. And of late the remembrance of the wedding seemed to come back again and again, insistent, vivid.

Yes, that morning love was whispering to her for the first time, if she had only known it, listened to it.

Then about a fortnight after she had left Della Braccia, she awoke to the full realisation of what her state of mind meant.

It was no good caring for Leonardo, for she was married—married; and long before she was free, he would have grown to care for some one else. Besides, it was wicked, outrageous, to wish to be free—to think of it even.



She went to her confessor and told him what had come to her; and he told her there was only one thing she could do, which she must do as quickly as possible, and that was to go back to her husband.

But now a hundred different emotions made this more and more distasteful. Surely Giuseppe had been right when he had said that this tail did not belong to that cat.

"Questa coda non è di quello gatto."



### CHAPTER XVIII

"THERE is a peasant girl below. She has come from Venice by train, and asks to see the Signor Conte."

It was Carlo who was speaking, and he was almost glad that he had even this distraction to offer, in order to take his master's thoughts off his trouble, for the poor old man was very sad in those days—sad and listless and much aged. He had risen to the occasion like an old war horse at the time of the duel, and from sheer determination and pluck, added to his wonderful constitution, recovered from the poisoning. The wound of the body had begun to heal, but the wound of the heart seemed to grow deeper every day. Only a fortnight, and he seemed to have lived years, and to be nearer than he had ever felt to his grave.

In those days he often spoke of death to Carlo.

"You will do this or that," he said once or twice, "when I am gone"; or, "Carlo,



you have been a good servant, and I have remembered you in my will"; then he would add, laughing: "But you must not push me downstairs, you know, for then the money would bring you ill luck."

And Carlo would shake his head, and say to himself that his master would soon die.

He had been able to bear everything else, but not that—that the Contessa should leave him. She might as well have stayed to the end, for the end was not far off.

And the Count was glad that something or other should break the monotony of his life. It was one thing to be at the Cadore with Lisa, but alone in the winter he was beginning to realise now a little of what she must have felt.

The days—how monotonous they were even to him, an old man! A little walk when the sun shone, and long naps over the fire; a little reading of the daily papers or a book; a letter or two; a talk with his fattore about the crops or the vines; meals which he had ceased to enjoy; now and then a visit from some neighbour who didn't interest him, for all the people of his own world were at Venice, except the Norinis: they never went to Venice. The doctor every day trying to cheer him up, and knowing that he could afford



a daily visit, nothing loth, for all his friendship, to combine business with pleasure; and then the long, long nights, when he slept so little, and when he dreamed or thought of Lisa—wondered what she was doing, if she would ever forgive him, if she had ever cared for him. Yes, he knew that she had once, but now. . . .

It was unusual for a peasant woman to ask for him—very unusual for one to come from Venice. Could it be a message from Lisa? Anyhow, he would see her. Then, as Carlo was leaving the room, with a sudden remembrance of Luigi, of Vremi.

"A peasant woman, you say, from Venice. Do you know her? what is her name?"

"It is Graziosa — Graziosa Merlini, the model."

"Graziosa!" He remembered having seen her in the streets; a beautiful girl—no doubt some fresh rascality of Luigi's; some poor girl...

"Show her up."

And Graziosa came up dressed in her best, and not looking half so handsome as she did in her everyday clothes, but still beautiful.

She fixed her green-blue eyes, the colour of the Adriatic, on the old Count. She had not expected so kindly, so handsome a face.



She looked round cautiously. She had something to tell the Count, but he must never say that she had told him.

"You can tell me, my child."

He had grown wonderfully gentle of late.

And Graziosa, anxious to do Louis Mallory a bad turn, as jealous in her way as the old Count himself, told him that the Contessa went out every night to meet a man on the canal.

The old man's face blanched, yet in an instant he recovered himself.

"Nonsense! You do not know what you are talking about."

Oh yes, she did! Her cousin was Signor Mallori's gondolier—he had told her; and then she had sat to Mallori himself. He was a fine painter, and he paid well, too; and he had asked her about the Contessa when he first saw her; then afterwards he had told her how they met at night—every night now that the Signore was away.

This, then, was the explanation of her desire to go, her reluctance to come away; and yet a stranger, an Englishman—how could it be, and he had thought that she cared for Norini!

All his good resolves vanished. His jealousy awoke again, insistent, dominant, sweeping all resolves to the wind, like a mountain storm in its fierceness.



He asked her question after question: when had she heard it, where did this man live? She did not know that he was jotting down addresses on the blotting-paper in front of him.

Then he became again the gentleman he always was at heart, when he did not allow his awful jealousy to master him.

"Now, my good girl, why have you come to tell all this?"

Graziosa stood there a moment dumbfounded. He had seemed to want to know.
Now he seemed angry; perhaps she had done
unwisely, but Beppo had told her that the old
Count was away; then her cousin, the other
gondolier, had said that the lady from the Casa
Braccia came out to meet Mallori. Torn with
jealousy, with anger, she had wanted to do
him a bad turn, to revenge herself. She had
found out that he was at Le Cadore, and she
had come. Then, because he was old, and
she thought it did not matter, she told him
about herself and Mallory.

"He is so beautiful, Mallori—so beautiful, like a god," she told the old Count, "and——"

"How old is he?"

Every word she said seemed to tear something within him, to suffocate him.

"He seems to be about five-and-twenty—no, perhaps twenty-nine."



The girl was enjoying the situation.

"And you hate him, eh?"

The Count's quick brain took in that this woman might be useful.

He got up and went to his desk.

"There, that is for your journey." He pressed some money into her hands. "Now go; and if I hear that you have told any one this story, you understand me—I shall hand you over to the police."

After she had gone he stood for a moment leaning on the table with both hands. How old, how feeble he felt! while the anger, the jealous anger within, surged like an imprisoned sea.

She was, after all, treacherous, false, unfaithful, like all women. Could she not have had the decency to wait till he was dead. And then, the letters she wrote! How could any woman be so false? And at her mother's house, where, how had she met this man?

He would go to Venice, he would insist on seeing her. If this was true he would tell everybody; he would change his will, he . . .

He had forgotten now how she had thrown herself between him and his son's pistol. She was a bad woman—not even faithful to one lover: first Vremi—and she had laughed when he killed Vremi—and then Norini; and now



a stranger, a foreigner, a painter, a man of no family, no position! Good heavens! was it possible—and she the daughter of Di Val Moreno!

Now nothing, nothing would stop him.

He rang for Carlo.

Before an hour had gone by they were in the train on their way to Venice.



#### CHAPTER XIX

It was almost at the hour at which the old Count got into the train, that Donna Lisa made up her mind to do as her confessor had said, to go back to her husband, to try and do her duty till the end.

How much more difficult it would be now, she hardly gauged as yet. The freedom, how sweet it had been!-the freedom of thought, the freedom of action, the quiet gliding in and out of canals, the drive to the Lido. and the silent musings watching the sea, now turbulent, recalcitrant, as it were, against the boisterous buffeting of the wind, now somnolent, dreaming in the sunshine, resembling her life. The agitations of a few weeks ago, how they had buffeted, buffeted, and torn, and wearied—wearied so, that now, even after these weeks of rest, she yet still felt weary, spiritless. the energy of the restless, buoyant activity of her youth dormant, exhausted, like an extinct volcano.

She was conscious to-day, when she had



resolved to go back, that she wanted to go on dreaming; yet the natural directness and healthiness of her nature proclaimed that dreaming was a sin, since there was always the same figure in her dreams, the same hero to the fairy tale she wove—the figure of Leonardo Norini, the companion of her childhood, whom she knew now she had always loved.

And the colourless future, the long, dreary years that stretched before her while he worked and won fame, and grew to love another, that she put from her from day to day, because she could not bear to think of it. And now she told herself that to think of the future was to do wrong; and through her being coursed a little bitterness against her mother and father. They must have known, who were grown up, that it could not turn out well that she should marry this old man—that it was against nature. They ought to have warned her that one day she would love. Oh, how wonderful, how wonderful love was!

And now suddenly, she noticed that spring was nearly here, that Venice was beginning to look bright again, that the sunshine was stronger and danced in bright golden coins on the canals, and that birds flew in and

out of the campanile, of the belfries of all the churches, and that the peasants began to don brighter colours, and that often the canal was crowded in the afternoon.

Spring, the renascence of nature, and the renascence of inspiring hopes in the heart, only he was far away, her beloved; and the image of the old man at Le Cadore seemed to represent immortality of weariness.

Only pity could save him now, pity for his age, and his growing weakness, for his certain but slow march towards death; and she prayed that she might have the courage to go on walking by his side to the very end, to the very end; while she tried to battle with the feeling which seemed to suffocate her, the piercing, wicked hope that the end might come soon.

And, seated in the train, it seemed to the Count that at last the end was near. After the effort of hurrying to catch the train he felt very ill. The excitements of the past weeks, of late, in the enforced solitude of Le Cadore, he had begun to feel how great they had been—and then his illness. To-day it did not seem to him that he had yet thrown off the effects of the poison, nor that his wound had healed. He needed her care, he needed rest; and the constant, gnawing



anxiety, the grief at her departure, kept him back from recovery. She was cruel after all, he told himself—cruel and selfish and false, to leave him when he was ill and weak and needed her, in order to meet a man on the canal, to amuse herself. How was it possible that he could have been so deceived? Presently Carlo gave him some brandy, and he revived a little, then he dozed. It is not far from Le Cadore to Venice. When he reached Venice he felt stronger.

His first instinct was to go to the Palazzo di Val Moreno, to insist on seeing her, then he followed another impulse and went to his hotel. Already he felt better. Venice has an enchantment, a spell, which she throws on each one as he approaches her riva—her riva, which is like the arms of a woman one loves stretched out to enfold one, and in which one forgets—forgets to speak or laugh or weep, in which one only lies listening to the murmuring waters which seem to say: "Dream and sleep, dream and sleep," and to which it is sufficient to reply to, with a sigh of content.

Never had Venice looked more cheerful, more alive than to-day, after the long months at Le Cadore. Fishwives quarrelled, and the townspeople hurried to and fro. The Piazetta



was crowded; the lions of St Marco looked as if they had suddenly come to life; every piece of marble seemed to be warmed by the revivifying sun, as if blood were coursing underneath its transparency. Here and there over the walls of the back streets a tinv green bud gave perceptions of greenery, and a pathway of sparkling, dazzling gold seemed to have divided the Canal 'Grande into two halves. Voices seemed full of merriment as they called to each other, and the gondoliers were humming tunes. The brightness of it all, the business, the twittering business, which was like the building of nesting birds, brought a feeling of reinforcement, of new vigour to the old man. Surely, surely Graziosa had been wrong!

And if she had not, what then?

Underlying thought, the thoughts over which we have no control, which in themselves seem to bear witness to the controlling powers of the spirit working persistently, urgingly, in despite of ourselves, like the growing of grass beneath frost-bound clods of earth, was the one strong thought which had possessed him of late, but which from day to day he put aside, which occasionally crushed, swept away his insane fits of jealousy, which marred the perfection of his really great



and pleasing personality. When he was young a woman had said:

"If Della Braccia were not jealous, he would be like a god."

"Like a god" once, strong and handsome, generous and strong, full of life and kindness and courage and tenderness, only the one curse of his life had been this jealousy, which grew as he advanced in years, as a weed grows over a tree that has grown old, which has no more power to put forth its own resisting branches.

Now to-day there were still the traces of the greatness, but they seemed choked by this developing passion, choked and warped, while now and then something glorious pierced.

If he could have taken her away into the desert somewhere and built her a marble palace there, she would have found him an ideal husband, Lisa; but if there had been an oasis near by, he would have been jealous of the traveller, of the very bedouins who came to drink at the well; he would have been jealous of the images in mirage even.

Once Lisa had told him, laughing, that he was a Turk at heart, that he would like to shut her up in a harem and cover her face with a veil; and he had told her, laughing, that she was right—that alone on a roof-top with her, in a deserted street, he would be jealous



of the sun which kissed her lips. Once this had amused her, but of late he had overstepped the limits of her patience.

He had gone to the hotel first, because it was the one of which the girl had given him the address as also being Mallory's. He remembered to have noticed Mallory at the beginning of the winter—a good-looking man with a good expression, a refined, speaking face, full of force, and with an intelligent look. What mystified him was how Lisa had met him, where. It would not be difficult to find out about him from the landlord. Venetian landlords are loquacious; and Della Braccia, the wealthy Della Braccia, who kept his apartment here all the year round, when his Palazzo was let, would have no difficulty in learning all he wanted.

And as, with the instinct of the dandy always dominating, he refreshed himself after his journey, and ordered luncheon, having grown calmer under the influence of Venice, which is like opium to the mind and body, even he asked himself what he should do if he found out that Graziosa was right, what he should do.

This morning some of the old desire to kill had departed, the desire which had seemed so natural of fulfilment with regard to Vremi.



Then she had been with him, and all Venice was talking of her beauty; he had felt as if she were going to be torn from him. But now she was away, and he wanted her to come back—to come back, even if what Graziosa said was true; yes, he wanted to keep her, to keep her till the end, till the end; then—well, then she could do as she liked.

But if he went to her with fresh reproaches, she certainly would not come back, never. She was weary already of all that had passed, and he had been wrong, wrong every time: wrong when he had suspected her of trying to get rid of him by poison; wrong when he thought that Leonardo had come to Le Cadore to be near her; wrong, he believed firmly now, about Vremi. Then why should he not be wrong now? What was this insisting possession which forbade him always to believe where he loved, and which with Lisa, because he adored her so, because she was so beautiful, and perhaps a good deal because she formed his last link with the emotions and passions. and stir and glory of life, seemed to have reached its culminating fury and strength. And as he lunched and got up now and then to pace the room, he was conscious of two things. One, that if he did not move cautiously he would lose her entirely; the other . . .



No, he could not face the other thought, the plan, the carrying out of which would wipe out all that had ever been—make him, as it were, fit for heaven—or at least for death, by the strength, as it were, of his own atonement.

"What has come to me?" he asked himself. "What has come to me?"

There was yet another feeling of which he was conscious, a strange, new feeling which had never been there before, and whose presence frightened him, because by its unusual character it seemed to hold in it the presage of death.

Now that he had had time to think, he was not so passionately angry. The jealousy which had seized him when Graziosa came to him in her subtle desire for vengeance against Mallory, whom she yet admired too much to harm by direct means, which had permitted him to listen to tales from a low peasant woman, a model of Venice, well known, about his lovely, his pure, his beautiful Lisa, had surged up like a flame on a pile of straw, but it had died down and given place to another, a wonderful thought, the desire that she should be happy.

Then once he laughed to himself happily as he lunched.



"If she cared, then . . ."

But she didn't care for any one but him. She had promised to tell him if she ever did, and he believed in her for all his jealous suspicions; down, down in his heart he believed her. If she had gone out with this man, it was because she was lonely, sadbecause she was young, because she wanted amusement; but she was pure and good. She would do nothing wrong unless she cared, and if she cared she would tell him. She had promised. Only in the future he must let her have more freedom: he must school himself. he must let her amuse herself, see people, go here and there, have friends; and then one day if she cared for anybody there would be time to carry out his plan, that magnificent plan from which he did not shrink from fear, but only because he believed that Donna Lisa loved him. She had told him so a hundred times, if only, if only he could control his passion of jealousy.

Surely brighter days were in store for Donna Lisa, although she did not know it, leaning on her balcony watching Venice, and the spring whispering to the encircling waters.

Once Carlo started as his master laughed to himself during luncheon. Was it possible



that the Contessa had driven him mad by leaving him? It would be a sad ending indeed for the Conte della Braccia, who had always seemed saner than any one else. How quickly he had started on his journey this morning, like a young man going to the races, calling out to Carlo to make haste with his bag!

But he was not mad: he was hungering for Lisa's kisses, and he was laughing at himself, a conquering laugh, as if he had vanquished an enemy; and yet a scoffing laugh, because, knowing himself so well, he could read in his own change of mood, that there was something strange abroad, when Della Braccia resolved not to be jealous, not to ask any questions of the hotel-keeper, not to forfeit anything which might bring her back, not to know, not to care so he could hold her again in his arms—his little Lisa, who was wife, daughter, mistress, everything to him, the old man having his last fling in this world, his last triumph.

And after luncheon he went and stood on the balcony of the hotel wondering what he should do, whether he should go to her suddenly, taking her by surprise, or write to her.

And not far on the opposite side of the



Canal 'Grande he could see his own Palazzo, yellow from the floor upwards, reddish-brown where the waters laved it from night till morning, from morning till night-time, and with the gilded water-gate glittering in the sunshine, like a clump of spears of gold challenging the sun.

"What is that?" he asked the waiter; and the waiter laughed.

"Those are the ribands of the Signorina, the forestiera. She puts those out, they say, so that the Signore—the Englishman who lives here in the hotel—can know when her father is out. They go out on the canal at night—when he is asleep, they say. They say they are to be married. If she puts blue, then he is not to come. They have strange ways, these foreigners. If one of our Venetian nobiltà did that. . . . But they say that she is honest all the same — a good girl."

The man shrugged his shoulders. What he had heard he knew only from Mallory's gondolier, who wouldn't say much; part of it he had made up.

Surely to-day was a wonderful day, and it was bright to live. Something in the old man's heart began to sing, as a bird sings, while the echoing roll of a past storm dies



down grumbling, and while it still rains, because it knows that the sunshine will appear in a moment, that all the terrible devastating storm which threatened its nest is over.



## CHAPTER XX

"Ан, Giorgio!"

Her voice and smile were sad, and seemed to freeze and dissipate at once the bright anticipation he had felt at the idea of meeting her again.

He had sat down and written to her one of his most charming letters, full of the sunshine which seemed to have pierced to his heart with the idea of seeing her, and as he listened to the waiter's tale of Mallory and the daughter of the man who had taken his Palazzo.

Surely Joan Bevington's ribands had carried a message to-day which made it well worth her placing them on the balcony—had she but known, brought balm to the heart of the old man. Yet it came too late for the happiness of Lisa for the present.

And while his letter breathed love it also told of deep penitence. Never again would he be jealous, never! She would not believe



him. But this time she would see: all his life he would believe in her, trust her, till she told him that she cared for some one else.

"You can see whom you wish, and amuse yourself-it is your right," he wrote, "and then one day, when you have fallen in love, you will tell me. . . . No, I will not tell you what I will do, but even then I will not be jealous. I want you to be happy whichever way it is, adorata. I have complete faith in you," he wrote now, when it was too late, when it seemed to Lisa that his trust was misplaced, that she was unfaithful. What an imbroglio it all was, and how everything in life seemed at cross purposes, and he reminded her of a promise, and a promise was so binding to Donna Lisa. If she had not given her promise at the time of the affair with Savielli when he had saved the Giotto, she would have gone back the day of her wedding, after she had met Leonardo. Yes, it was that morning when he had appeared to her in the forest with the sombre trees standing around, and the deep, cavernous interstices of dark green seeming to invite to hidden mysteries, with the sun shining far away at the end through glistening cobwebs wet with dew, and overhead trellises of lighter green



where the sun strove to pierce with its joyous "good morning" and reach the soft mosses of the glades, the tall leaves and curling fronds of fern, and fanlike bracken, that she had realised that she loved him. Only then, as now, it was too late, and she had been afraid lest after all she had made a mistake, since till then she had thought to love the old Count. Now she could see that she had been brave, brave and good, and faithful for nearly a year—a year which seemed like eternity. Now she was no longer good, she could not have patience any longer; only Leonardo had ceased to care for her, he was far away.

What she was trying to do now was to awaken pity, that miserable counterfeit of love which is like a bone to a man who is starving, yet which he clutches at, because it has the taste of meat.

Pity instead of love—it seemed to her that this letter, which should have been written by a boy of twenty, nauseated her, for she knew all that would follow: how he would hold her in his arms and kiss her and never leave her again, not for a moment; and she had tasted liberty and freedom of thought at least, and going back was hard, hard.

Yet, because the messenger was waiting, because she had resolved to do her duty,



because he was old and miserable and ill, and because her parents desired it so much, she wrote to him to come to the Palazzo.

And when he went to see her, he visited the flower shop in the Mercerie, and bought up all the most exquisite blooms—orchids and lilies and violets and roses—at outrageous prices; and even then they did not seem to him fair enough for Donna Lisa, the most beautiful woman in Venice, who forgave him, who was so good, so good, and who loved him.

And he did well to bring flowers, for they softened her heart a little bit. Yet it seemed to her that the saddest hour of all was when she had despatched the note and seated herself quietly on a chair by the window to wait and think. Once she re-read the letter and smiled bitterly.

"You say that now, but wait till you know, till you hear, then all that will begin again; and this time it will be worse." She hoped that he would never remind her of her promise. Yet he wrote:

"You have promised me to tell me when the day arrives;" and then a little further: "I, too, have a confession to make, but not of that kind—one that will make you believe that I will never be jealous again. If I am,



I will never kill any one—not even if you love them."

That at least was a comfort. If she ever told him, Leonardo would be safe, that was what she feared so much; and yet she told herself that in one of his blind furies Leonardo would not be safer than any one else—that if she told him she must persuade him that Leonardo no longer cared for her, or Leonardo must never come back again, never.

She gave but a passing thought to what his feelings would be; she had grown hard. It seemed to her that he deserved it, who had thought her a murderess, a wanton.

Presently she tried to tell herself that he had never thought it, that he was like a madman in his jealousy.

Then she went down to the big drawing-room where the Madonna smiled still at the canal—smiled as she had done the morning when she had been so near going away, and she stood in front of it with clasped hands, remembering how she had prayed to it once. How long ago it seemed! Now, to-day, it had lost its spell. It was not more beautiful, not so beautiful as many other pictures in the gallery—for it was like a gallery, this long salone, with its many beautiful pictures which had been the pride of the Di Val Morenos



for generations, and which made the Palazzo so celebrated, that when the family were away, tourists were allowed to visit it with a card of permission.

There were other Madonnas, too: Madonnas by Allori, by Veronese, by Fra Bartolommeo, by Fra Angelico, by Barabino, by Cimabue, with a great halo around the head of the Child Jesus; a Holy Family by Bellini, with niches looking like the carving outside a church; by Giorgione. with delicate glimpses of Campagna beyond; by Puligo, by Maratti, the Madonna looking like a society woman; by Albertinelli, by Ghirlandajo, by Baroccio; saints and prophets and holy people by Titian and Raphael, Correggio, and Fra Bartolommeo: and an infant Christ. which looked more like a young Bacchus, by Rubens. Only the Giotto had always held its place, because it was supposed to be one of the very few he had painted; and with Lisa it had always seemed like a sibyl, because it represented a girl of her own age, and because the sun shone on it from the canal in a peculiar way, and had seemed often to make it speak.

And the Giotto was the only Madonna without a Child. Now to-day, fierce almost, the longing for maternity had arisen within, the result of long musing. If she had been



married to another man, her life would have been like that of other women. She would have had children, something to dream about, to provide for from her great wealth, occupations of motherhood, its responsibilities, its anxieties-all the sweet torment, the ecstatic pain, the experiences which thresh out the mind, the rivalry with other women friends of hers who had married, the triumphs of comparison, the daily, hourly interest, the sweet cooing turned to prattle, in the gloomy Palazzo at Le Cadore. How delightful it would have been, how different her life! It seemed to her that it would not have mattered so much then, whether her husband was jealous or even old. If she had had a child - yes, then indeed she would have been content to see no one: but no doubt he would have been jealous of the child, too. No; she felt a wave of shame rise within her at the thought.

The child and the villa at Le Cadore did not seem in keeping, nor yet the Palazzo della Braccia. If there were a child, it would have had to be Norini's. The very thought seemed to her like infidelity, like adultery. Yet to-day she did not pray to the Madonna. She had no use for her now. It seemed to her as if it were she, with her misleading, satisfied smile, which never changed, which had brought all



the misery into her life. If she had not been so anxious to save it, she would have waited; and when she went back to Le Cadore, she would have seen Leonardo, and he would have told her of his love, and because there was no one else to marry ther with her poverty, they would have allowed it at last, her parents.

Unreasoning and unreasonable, as women are, she had forgotten the episode of the purple dress, and that once it had seemed the most awful thing that could happen to sell a picture, to a low Jew, and of all pictures the Giotto—the Giotto, which seemed part of the childhood in which Leonardo had played a part—Leonardo, who had gone away, right far away, far, far away, out of her life—who would never return, not to her.

To-day she would not care if Savielli took all the pictures.

She was aware, and the realisation startled her, of a certain decadence of her mind since the day the old Count had saved the Giotto. And it was with a faint return of the old gratitude, that as she heard the big hall doors swing open, then a step on the stairs—a step which he tried to make hurried, in keeping with the youth of his bride, with his own joyance—she advanced with something of



matronly stateliness towards the door, and exclaimed with a smile she tried to make bright, and a faint weariness in her tones, which made the words resemble a sigh:

"Ah, Giorgio!"



#### CHAPTER XXI

It would not have needed so worldly-wise and discriminating a man as the old Count, or one so old or so fond of her, to notice the change in Lisa, while in a sense it was an almost imperceptible one, affecting neither her beauty or her grace or her youth; yet it was sufficient to tell the old man that he had gone too far, that he had wearied her, that, if there was nobody else, he at least had ceased to be the pivot on which her emotions centred themselves, and turned.

The idealistic camaraderie, which had been so like love in her that he had mistaken it, had gone, and he doubted much, with a new diffidence, whether he would ever conjure it up again. Even it brought back, with a strange sudden force, which he was able to dominate presently, a resemblance to the old mistrust. Graziosa's words returned, and for one instant he asked himself if it were not all true, if she had not come to Venice to



meet a lover, and now no longer wanted him. In vain she tried to be kind, to be loving even, to reproach him with some of the play-fulness of the earlier months of their married life. She could not do it. Something grave, weary, disillusioned, had entered into the tones of her voice, into her expression, her manner, into the way she left her hand passive in his, which he could not fail to read aright. She no longer cared for him: perhaps she had never cared. If there had ever been any love, his unreasonable jealousy, his mistrust had killed it.

They seated themselves side by side on the settee on which she had sat that evening in the dusk, when her father had come to see her. Then everything had seemed in half shadow—even her inspirations, her wishes. She had not known then what love was; that, too, had been in half shadows—veiled shadows of a sheltered maidenhood — inexperienced, nurtured strictly away from the world, away from companions of either sex; and in the semi-obscurity of her girlish, almost childlike mind, the old man had seemed the shadowy hero of her life's romance.

Now to-day the sun sparkled everywhere. It was three o'clock, and the canal was covered with gondolas darting hither and

thither like swallows, swooping down to catch at dragon-flies, or like fishes escaping from big monsters of the sea. Some still had the feltre up, and through the windows one could see men or women—sometimes both—reclining on cushions; others were uncovered, and the women in them magnificently dressed. all Venice would have departed, and it was good to enjoy the first breath of spring. the big salon, the windows had been thrown open by Giuseppe. Here it was warm, for the sun had been shining in since eleven, and the figures in the pictures looked as if they were sunning themselves a while. The brightness gave a realistic look to portions of the pictures which represented sunshine or glory to the aureolas around the saints' heads, to the rays of light from tapers, or supposed to be streaming from heaven on to the bald heads of St Josephs, and centred on the crêche of the infant Christ. But notwithstanding the warm sunshine, the air of gladness, and the bright tints on Lisa's rich auburn hair, the old man felt cold, horribly cold, with a cold which was like that of a churchyard—the cold. icy breath of death.

Yet the spirit of the old cavalier, the squire of dames, was not going to faint so easily or so silently. He who had once been able to



win the love of women, who not so long ago had inspired almost passion in this very girl at his side—who, perhaps, if it had not been for his frenzied jealousy, would yet have been able to garner her tenderness and keep it till death, had still a card to play, and he would not fail to play it, to stake all that he had at hand, in order to rekindle the vital spark of her affection.

When she knew that he had been told all about her and Mallory, and yet that he had done nothing, that he had determined to say nothing, do nothing, so that she should come back to him, that he had been in the same hotel with Mallory, and yet possessed his soul in patience, not asked any questions of the servants or the hotel-keeper, only learned the truth by accident from enquiring casually about the ribands Joan Bevington fastened to her window—would she not then believe that he was changed; and, ceasing to fear him, would she not come back again to her allegiance, trust him, confide in him, as she had been used to do?

He could not have said that he thought so, but he hoped so.

And, holding her hand there in the sunshine, stroking it, he told her of Graziosa.

"Ah, cara, can you forgive my having been



jealous, when for your sake I was ready to bear even that?"

Tears were struggling in his eyes as he told her the story.

"Pity me, pity me, Lisa mia!" he said. "If you have ceased to love me, at least pity me, forgive me, since no one but God knows the punishment it is to me to have alienated you by my jealousy. Ah, Lisa cara, do not be cruel to the poor old man who will so soon die!"

But the sorrows and the joys of the old do not interest the young, nor even other old people, as the sorrows and the joys of the young do. The old seem more in keeping with sorrow, and their joys have something unnatural about them which do not inspire; rather, it seems as if one grudged them after these long years, what they must have had their measure of, and which is owing to the generation that is following.

And the passions of the old nauseate the young and healthy; most of all, they had begun to nauseate a woman like Donna Lisa, who realised now that by all human laws, she had a right to youth and freshness.

Yet, as she raised the flowers to her face which the old Count had brought her, she strove to pity.

"You must not cry, caro, you must not."



She took her filmy pocket handkerchief and passed it over his face as if he were a child. "There—you look better."

Then she told him that she would come back, but that she felt so weary, that she would look after him always, that she would be tender and true and faithful; but that if he were jealous again she would go and never return, and that even as it was, he must not torment her, must let her lead her life, and be under his roof as a daughter.

It was good that she would come back: perhaps presently he would win her love.

It had been better if he had left it so, asked no more, required no more. He heaved a sigh.

"You are good to come back, carina," he said, "but . . . when one loves as I do, then ——" With a flash of his eyes immediately controlled: "Tell me, cara, tell me—was it true about you and the painter? I will not be angry—see, I am not cross at all!" He smiled at her. "Only tell me, because, then ——" He broke off.

The plan, the magnificent, though desperate plan, outlined itself again, only to be rejected as impossible, at the moment when Lisa said she would return to him.

Lisa hesitated. She had promised, it was



true, but then, how things had changed since then! He would not be jealous now, but later, one day, he would, and then it would hurt him. She was, after all, the mistress of her own heart.

"Oh, that painter—I do not even know him. I only know that man, Guido Malfi, who does those saints, those pale things like ghosts; and he is ill, dying, at the hospital, mama says. You remember, he wanted to paint my picture." She chatted on a little nervously, yet apparently brightly, so that he should not begin to talk about herself any more.

He had noted her hesitation, and the old agony began to gnaw again at his heart.

Did she love some one else? Had she at last broken a promise? Was she thinking of Leonardo? He remembered her farewell at Le Cadore that evening, when he had found them sitting in the dusk, and Leonardo had raised her hand to his lips. If Leonardo had not been the son of an old friend, if Luigi had not been there, he would have ordered him out of the house.

And now her caressing words came back, the words in which she had bidden Leonardo return, seeming to challenge him, her husband, to interfere between her and her lover, her childhood's friend.



Remembering his own youth, he told himself that if he had received a God-speed like that in the olden days, a farewell so tender from the woman he loved, for nothing on earth would he have gone. It was not possible that Leonardo would have left Le Cadore if he loved this woman; not when he lived next door, and could, at least, catch a glimpse of her every day. For that was how Della Braccia had been—reckless, full of fire in his courtships, in his intrigues, in his wooing, and content at times to catch the fleeting reflection of his beloved's skirts, in the distance.

But she, perhaps, loved him, and, recognising the signs, had wearied of him, who for all his tenderness yet only represented the counterfeit of passion, for passion must have also the strength, the vitality, the fresh breeziness of youth, the ozone, the salt, the perfume of emotions.

"If it is not he, then is there another? Tell me—oh, Lisa, tell me! I will not be angry, but I will not weary you, instead——" He broke off, and she could feel more than hear how dry his throat was, how his heart was beating; and the glory of sunshine outside seemed to dazzle her brain, so that she could not see clearly what to do, could not ward off his questioning, parry it with jest or counter



question, as she might have done in the cool of the evening, or at night with a shaded lamp hiding the colour that came and went almost with shame, and the pallor which succeeded, lest when he learned it should kill him.

"You promised," he said, as she smiled a little oddly, and said:

"What silly questions you ask, caro! Who do I ever meet—who do I ever see to love? Vremi—I detested him, and you have killed him; who else do I ever see?"

Between them both one name stood out which neither mentioned, but yet which was the obvious answer to his question, to her assumed indifferent remarks.

"Leonardo?" The old man's voice was harsh, horror-struck, and it ended almost with a cry of despair. He seized her arm, he gazed into her eyes, and while he asked her about her love for another, she read the deep, the burning passion in his for her. If she told him, he would kill him. For nothing on earth would she keep her promise this time, she told herself.

But in the changing colour of her eyes, in the widening and narrowing and dilating of the iris, as different feelings seemed to float across them, he could read fear of him, love



for the other man, and knew that if she had ever really loved him as a wife, the love of Donna Lisa Di Val Moreno was his no more.

"Oh!" He rose to his feet, whether to strike her or for what reason she could not tell, so dazed and frightened she had become by the strange import of his silence. Then he staggered forward and fell. He had been seized with a stroke of paralysis, and fell to the floor, his tall frame seeming to make the polished parquet floor tremble and rebound, and vibrate. And as he fell a chandelier of exquisite workmanship and iridescent colouring fell from the ceiling with a terrible crash, and broke to pieces, the bits of shivered glass rolling along the polished surface of the floor, and catching the sun's rays, throwing out little twinkling swords of varied colours which looked like flame from a supernatural fire, or little jewelled rapiers, darting at some unseen enemy. Outside one could hear the cry of the gondoliers:

" Premi premi a sta!"



#### CHAPTER XXII

"HE will live," said Dr Lanzi, who had been summoned from Le Cadore to assist the Venetian doctor, who had always attended him. Yes, after all he had gone through, it seemed quite likely that he would live; and Donna Lisa left him every morning for half an hour to go and pray that he might live; if not, all her life she would feel that she had killed him—killed him by her silence. would have been better, she told herself, to tell all to the old man than to make him suffer like that. Yes, now she wanted him to live. for she had been cruel and hard and unforgiving; and she wanted to talk things over quietly with him, to tell him that what she felt for Leonardo would make no difference—that he had gone away, that he no longer cared for her—that they two must live as happily as possible and forget the past, he his suspicions. and she her love. She wanted to tell him, too, that they had never spoken of love-never met by arrangement since her marriage, and that,



indeed, they had only met once or twice at all, and then he had gone away.

And she nursed him more tenderly than ever before. This time she would have no nurse. He could not be moved from the Palazzo di Val Moreno even if they had desired to do so; and then his own Palazzo was let, he would be more comfortable here than at the hotel, and it would be better not even to move him upstairs, the doctor said.

So a bed had been placed in the big salon, amongst the pictures which seemed to be keeping him company, and, as if it were ordained by fate, the most convenient corner for the bed, was just under the famous Madonna of Giotto.

"There the light is good; we can examine better if he has broken anything in his fall." The sound of the fall, of the shivered glass haunted Lisa for days.

Somehow, she did not like to see him lying underneath the Giotto. The Madonna seemed to have turned her eyes downwards now, instead of looking towards the canal, and it seemed to be pitying him when it was all her fault, Lisa said to herself. If only she had answered her prayer differently—not continued to smile as if everything were all right.

Yet it seemed to be there in order to remind her of all she owed him. Always in the years



to come he would be linked in her mind with that Madonna, for weal or woe.

And he lay there a long time, without being able to move; and Lisa was glad to nurse him, with no one to help her, but her mother and Viola and Carlo.

"She really is devoted to him," her mother said to the Marchese, who lately had been much worried about her happiness.

"She is a marvel, a saint," said Dr Lanzi; and even Giuseppe was beginning to think that perhaps questa coda did belong to quello gatto.

Then the real spring, the last days of April, brought back a little colour to his wizen cheeks, like that on a faded rose, and his eyes regained a little of their old fire. Only how gentle he had grown, how patient! Lisa felt inclined to cry every time he spoke. He was so pathetic in his weakness; and if she did not feel real love for him, she felt at least the deep tender pity which is akin to it, and which the old man was fain to be thankful for, seeing that he knew now, that he would never have anything else. Presently he grew stronger and sat on the balcony watching the passers-by, and Lisa would tell him little bits of news, and read the papers to him. The left arm had not recovered. It was the side that Vremi had wounded, and



he would never use it again, the doctors said.

"Ah, the old man is near the end," he would say to her; and she would smile, and say:

"I believe you will live for ever, dear one." Yes, she called him "dear one" now. While he allowed her to come and go at will, never questioning her; and she told him about the ribands, and every day almost he would ask:

"What coloured ribands did she hang to-day?"

Surely Joan would have been pleased and amused, had she known what an interest the Della Braccias took in her ribands, the while Mallory thought that she was the Contessa. But her real object in fastening the ribands to the balcony they never learned.

And then one evening, while soft breezes played in and out of the window, and gondolas flitted backwards and forwards on the canal, only the light visible, and the gleam from the lamps danced up and down in the waters, and lovers tinkled on mandolins, and boatmen sang, the old Count asked her to tell him everything, everything about her and Leonardo.

There did not seem much to tell, but he asked her so many questions about the long ago and about lately, too.

"You love him very much then, darling," he



had said so tenderly that she could not believe that it was really he speaking.

And she crept to him in the dark room, in which the only light was that which streamed in from the lights outside, from the windows of the Palazzos opposite, and which gleamed upon the pictures on the walls, making Giotto's Madonna look as if she were listening, peering out of the darkness to see what was happening, and laid her head upon his knee. He passed his right hand over her lovely hair lovingly, almost reverently, as if each separate strand was very dear to him, sacred.

"Yes, dear, but he no longer loves me; and soon, if you will have patience, I shall not think of him again, so do not let it distress you. No doubt, when you were a young man, you sometimes thought you loved somebody better than your wife, is it not so? and then after a time you came back to her."

The Count smiled to himself. She spoke so quaintly; yes, he was afraid that his conscience wasn't quite clear on that score. He had had more than one flirtation in the days when his first wife was alive, but then Italian blood is hot, and she was not Donna Lisa.

"But with you it is different. It is your first love, my child, and it will be strong and



enduring. You must marry him one day, carina, when I am gone. He is a good boy, and I shall know that you are happy." Then, as an after-thought: "Where is he now—does he write to you?"

She raised her head proudly and looked at him. He could see her eyes in the light from the canal.

"Do you think, care, that I would permit such a thing, that he would dream of it? We have never spoken of love—not since that day."

Ah, how glad she was later that she had told him! He gave a sigh of content. Since he no longer had her love, his respect for her purity, that remained untainted.

"You are good, my child, and God will bless you."

When she bade him good-night he kissed her two or three times tenderly, then again as she was leaving the room. Once he said: "Good-bye" instead of "Good-night," and she laughed and said:

"I am not going any further than the next room, so it is not a long good-bye."

But it was the longest of all, the last.

She slept soundly, tired as a child with all her emotions, with attending to him, with her hard, hard fight with herself.



She did not hear him get up and go to his writing-table.

She did not hear him open her door and come to the bedside, and lean over her, gazing at her beautiful face while tears streamed down his cheeks, and he seemed to be drinking in the vision of her as if he would take it away where he was going, the vision of her with one arm thrown over the edge of the coverlet, and one curved round her head, the breath coming evenly like the breath of a child, and raising the delicate laces at her throat ever so slightly, then falling again.

She did not hear him sigh as he paused one moment on the threshold of the door which divided the rooms.

In the morning they found him dead, the old man, with a tiny phial in his right hand and a rose she had given him on his lips. In his last sleep how handsome he looked, as if he defied the outrages of time and disease, and even of death itself.

And on the table they found two letters, one to her telling her of his love—his great love, which was no longer selfish or jealous or unkind, but which had prompted the only act which could free her. The other to Leonardo Norini, a long letter, telling him everything.

"If you are not good to her as she



deserves," he had written, "my spirit will haunt you to your dying day."

Lisa hesitated about sending this. Yet the wishes of the dead, who would dare violate them?

Lisa cannot even now say how much she loved, but she knows that she will always, always think of him with tenderness. That there will be something in her memory of him which will be different to anything else, something which even Leonardo will never reach, for he was a wonderful old man. Venice cannot understand why she mourns such an old husband, especially as he has left her all his money.

And on the day that they carry him to the cemetery, Lisa glances up at the Palazzo Braccia, which is now hers, and sees white ribands floating from the balcony; but she does not know that it is because that day Louis Mallory has discovered that he has been making love to Joan instead of, as he thought, to her. She knows nothing of the part she has played in the lives of those two, but the sight of the white ribands makes her think of Leonardo, and she sighs. She wonders what he will do when he receives the dear old man's letter, for she is certain that he has written about her. How strange the



message from the dead, the speaking words still travelling, long after he has been laid to rest!

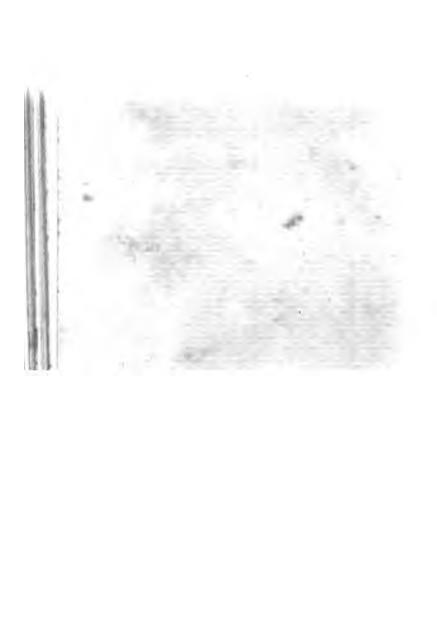
And the Marchesa, thinking how well all has turned out, since Lisa is rich and free, says once or twice throughout the day:

"He certainly was a charming old man."

THE END











DATE DUE					

STANFORD UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305-6004